MINISTRY AND SECULARITY

By MICHAEL IVENS

IT IS ALWAYS disconcerting when a question asked in terms of one set of presuppositions is answered in terms of quite different ones, as every conservative knows who attempts communication across the conservative-radical divide. This happens with growing frequency in religious life when the question of new forms of ministry comes on to the agenda of community meetings. The conservative innocently asks how the life he has always led (adapted in detail, it is true, but unchanged in essential) can be attached to new forms of work. In answer, forms and conditions of work are proposed to him which, if they can be shown on a new set of principles to harmonize with the religious vocation, can only create discord within the system to which an earlier generation had grown accustomed. More often than not his question is purely practical: the answer comes as a challenge to his basic notions of what religious life is about.

In the past, there was a close and complex link between religious vocation and the apostolate. In the first place, the religious lived in the comforting awareness that although theoretically his work for the poor, the sick or the education of children might equally be discharged by lay folk, in fact large areas of social service were his own preserve. In addressing themselves to the real needs of the world, religious found themselves engaged in forms of work which sharply distinguished them from the secular professional world of the day; and this distinctness, though fortuitous, established a certain congruence with their vocation to be 'set apart' on another level. Again, religious for the most part accepted without difficulty that certain forms of activity, though good in themselves, were closed to them: a notion arising partly from a somewhat monastic interpretation of leaving the world, and partly from the fact that in a number of situations the world at large felt ill at ease in the presence of the old religious habit. And finally, the work of religious was closely incorporated into community life. Its smallest details fell within the compass of religious obedience. Within an institution

run by the congregation, work could be shaped to the specifications of the horarium and of enclosure; it could be allocated and changed with little or nothing in the way of consultation. Certainly, the restrictions laid upon work created their own tensions and frustrations, but one thing in the past was undeniable: ministry, whether considered as an element of the experience of religious life or as a sign, bore an unmistakably religious and communitarian stamp.

Few would wish to retain the elements of tension and frustration that went with the details of the old system. For the most part, debate between the forces of conservation and the forces for change is conducted within a general acceptance of the post-conciliar situation. But it is becoming increasingly clear that within this situation there is room for sharp differences of outlook and practice. Many feel that although the pettiness, excessive control and even tyranny of the past should be banished beyond reprieve, the essential elements of the old harmony between life and ministry should be retained, even at the price of accepting certain limitations on apostolic work. Only at this price can religious life be preserved as a distinct vocation within the Church. If the hey-day of the old institutions is passed, at least religious should work on community-based teams, and if the range of their ministries may well be extended, it is important for the religious to realize that there comes a point where he leaves the laity and the secular institutes to go it alone. On this view, tendencies today (manifest in attitudes and talk as much as in actual activity) which seem inconsistent with such basic principles would be seen as a threat to religious life itself through the secularization of ministry.

In contrast, we can discern another set of attitudes arising from a somewhat more radical interpretation of the situation of apostolic religious life in the post-conciliar Church. Behind these lies the strong conviction that the truly apostolic vocation is something new, and that only radical changes of approach and style will suffice to exorcize deeply embedded attitudes which grew up in response to an inadequate theology of the 'mixed life' and the restrictions of a now obsolete canon law. The significance of the council is seen mainly in having initiated a process that is still going on, and as having implications that are only now becoming apparent. Allied to this goes a keen awareness that religious life needs to make its own new attitudes of the Church to the world, to work within the world as leaven and not over against it. On these premisses what is important about religious life is not so much to be different as to

belong, to work within the world's structures and to create community wherever it finds people living and working together.

With these general attitudes go markedly different approaches to ministry. More specifically, they tend to produce quite different answers to two questions which underlie much of the tension that bedevils discussion on new forms of ministry: How far is the apostolic religious debarred by his very vocation from certain forms of work? and, How far should ministry be governed by the demands of community? Though it is hardly necessary to call attention to the limitations of any general discussion on these questions (not least because in particular cases the charism of each institute has to be taken into account), it should be possible to offer a general framework within which they can be discussed.

Religious life a disqualification?

The first of these questions assumes a variety of forms and is often given urgency by recriminations within communities and by reactions of surprised astonishment on the part of society at large. It is not always put in the same terms; what is accepted in one environment is problematic in another. Teaching a profane subject in a university or state school, taking a job in a factory or office, espousing controversial causes, can all create problems of principle, and it seems likely that religious will be confronted with such problems for some time to come.

It should be noted that, traditionally, the range of work open to religious has always been wide. Their activity has never been limited to teaching or making converts. Works of material service – without strings attached – have always counted among the tasks of active religious, and in the Little Brothers and Sisters of Jesus our own day has seen the recognition by the Church of sheer silent witness. Religious, then, have a versatility which at the present time is far from being unanimously accorded to priests (a priest-social worker is often classified as a 'hyphenated priest', and never lacks critics to charge him with dissolving the specifically priestly ministry into something else. The sister who is a social worker would not expect to be described as a hyphenated nun).

Nevertheless, the versatility of the religious operates within limits; and indeed most religious would agree with this. It is why for the most part they do not take jobs on the Stock Exchange. The question is: what sort of principles enable us to determine the limits in particular situations?

A starting point is provided by the council documents, in which we can discern three broad categories into which – setting apart what belongs specifically to the ordained priest – we can divide christian activity. The first is apostolic activity in the narrow sense; that is, the various forms of spreading the word. Secondly comes service to the sick, the suffering and the poor (the corporal works of mercy). The third is the secular or temporal, in the sense of the whole vastly complex pattern of activity by which man creates and maintains in being his own human world, projecting around himself a human environment. All these are of concern to the christian as such, and as the decree on the laity observes, lay people, like religious, sometimes devote themselves wholly to the apostolate.[1] The more however a form of activity is secular or temporal the more it is seen as 'proper and special' to the layman, while the religious, though no 'stranger to the earthly city', finds his main scope in works of direct apostolate and tasks in which the qualities of mercy and service are dominant. 'Through them, Christ should be shown contemplating on the mountain, announcing God's kingdom to the multitude, healing the sick and the maimed, turning sinners to wholesome fruit, blessing children, doing good to all, and always obeying the will of the Father who sent him'.[2]

It cannot be claimed, however, that even as a generalization this will commend itself to all. Furthermore, it is by no means easy to draw particular inferences from it, since the council confines itself to a high level of generality. To indicate what they have in mind in talking about a category of secular or temporal action proper to the laity, the council fathers preferred to offer a rather random handful of examples than to draw hard and fast lines of demarcation.[3] Indications appeared in the documents themselves that the category of the temporal or secular is by no means seen as univocal; and in the two secular occupations expressly recognized by the council as consistent with the priestly apostolate, scientific research and manual work, we can discern a distinction familiar to christian thought from the middle ages.[4] All this makes the applica-

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[1] Cf *Apostolicam Actnositatem*, ch III. [2] *Lumen Gentium*, 46.

[3] *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, 7.

[4] *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 8; Cf *Religion & the rise of capitalism*, Tawney. 'The assumption upon which all this body of doctrine rested was simple. It was that the danger of economic interests increased in dirct proportion to the prominence of the pecuniary motives associated with them. Labour – the common job of mankind – is necessary and honourable; trade is necessary, but perilous to the soul; finance, if not immoral, is at best sordid and at worst disreputable'.

tion to particular cases of the council's broad distinctions rather problematic. From the fact that religious life is an extension of baptism and the secular a factor in the preparation of the kingdom, it is easy to argue that the distinctions made by the council are no more than vestiges of an outmoded dualism. If religious life is seen first and foremost as an eschatological sign or 'a blazing emblem of the kingdom', and the temporal order as a poor relation of the spiritual, the conclusion will inevitably follow that religious ought to differ in almost every way from christians in the world. The meaning both of religious vocation and of the secular are less simple than either of these extreme positions is prepared to allow, and unless an attempt is made to consider each 'in the round', with attention to the often elusive data of experience, discussion is unlikely to transcend the level of statement and counter-statement of a rather oracular sort.

Religious Life

Can we enumerate the characteristics of the religious vocation which no discussion on work and ministry can neglect? Perhaps the first to mention would be witness, the sign value of religious life. The second would be consecration, which is not man's initiative in dedicating himself to God but the awareness of being loved, seized, sanctified by God, and his response to this in what one writer, defining religious life, has called

> A maximal effort of the baptized man to foster as much as possible, in the totality of his being and his life, this seizure of himself by God, an effort so to live that his baptismal consecration will spread through his consciousness and his activity to such an extent that nothing is more determinant in his life.[5]

This entails the twofold commitment of renunciation and presence – just as baptism is a dying in order to live and confirmation the receiving of the life-giving Spirit in order to be present at a new creation. This double commitment lies at the root of the relationship of the religious with his world.

The element of renunciation is given visible embodiment in a life-style through celibacy, and, in a lesser degree, through poverty and obedience. But these are not isolated features unrelated to life as a whole. To be more than ill-fitting ornaments, they need to

[5] Tillard. J. M. R. O.P.: 'The Renewal of Religious Life', in *Theology of Renewal* (ed L. K. Shook, Montreal, 1968), Vol 2, p 139.

be part of a life characterized in its entirety by 'non-conformity', in the strong pauline sense of not being conformed to the world.[6] One hesitates to call this 'unworldliness', since that irretrievably trivialized term, 'worldly', has come to refer, almost exclusively, to the pleasures and fads of society. And these, while the christian will wish to eschew them, are not the point at which the conflict between the world and the gospel is at its fiercest. The prophetic non-conformity of religious life, without which celibacy would be batchelorhood and poverty and obedience a rather unattractive behaviourism, is a standing out against all in society which frustrates the growth of the kingdom and fetters the spirit of the beatitudes.

As a mode of presence, religious life is a way of making present the mystery of the Church, since it is a defining characteristic of religious life that the Church formally acknowledges it to be an expression of her own life. This is not only because it foretells the resurrected state but because it proclaims that in the Church the Spirit is actually present in power. If, then, religious life does not give cash value to the language used by the Church to define and to commend holiness it has lost its reason for existing. And this language includes the pronouncements of the council, notably in the constitution on the Church in the modern world, about serving and caring and entering into 'the joys and the hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the men of this age'.[7]

Lastly, it will be well to add that religious life supposes conditions of feasibility. This is not to suggest that the religious stands in particular need of 'protection', that he is so fragile and temptation-prone that only a rigid set of controls, equally inimical to personal freedom and to attainment, can keep him faithful to his own free decision. The point is the more general one that stable commitment normally requires a certain ethos and structures. For the most part, these should be the very things that also give witness to and promote the apostolate: certainly they should not obstruct either. Thus *Lumen Gentium* sees the vows themselves not only as witness to the world, but also as supportive. 'He intends, by the profession of the evangelical councils in the Church, to free himself from those obstacles which might draw him away from the fervour of charity and the perfection of divine worship'.[8] What in more detail is humanly necessary for the living of a religious vocation,

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[6] Rom 12, 2. [7] *Gaudium et Spes*, 1. [8] *Lumen Gentium*, 44.

and what sort of situations render it difficult or impossible, is not easy to say, and allowance must be made for individual strengths and weaknesses. But to dismiss the entire consideration as unworthy of notice is hardly consistent with realism.

Action

For the apostolic religious, activity is not an 'overflow' or an extra, but an integral element of the life. The fact that the apostolic religious life is not *defined* by a specific set of activities must not lead us into setting up unreal distinctions between what one *is* and what one *does*.[9]

The features of religious life enumerated above are not qualities to be developed for themselves and subsequently 'clothed' in action. The consecration, the witness, the renunciation, the presence: all this actually comes about in the commerce of the individual with the group of children, teenagers or old folk, the patients or the neighbours who give the apostolate its concrete form.[10] Work enters deeply into the fabric of life. It fashions outlook, furnishes friends, governs interests. All this holds equally true of religious life. We can say three things, then, about the activity of religious. First, there must be an end to those attitudes of reserve, still current in some quarters, whereby the relationship of the religious life and apostolate takes the form, in effect, of curbing the effectiveness and wholeheartedness of the latter. The world today has no time for the amateur. The religious is not one who finds room for 'suitable forms of good work' in the interstices of institutional life. The second characteristic is that work in its concrete reality (as an object of genuine, even absorbing interest, as the context of close personal relationships) must harmonize with the experience of living out that consecration which defines religious life, so that not only discharging *this* task, but entering on it with full dedication, is at the same time the living out of a vocation. And thirdly, since it is of the essence of religious life to be a sign, the actual work situation of the religious should form part of his witness, or at least be consonant with it. This is why, although yesterday's tensions between action as such and religious life as such need to be superseded, the

[9] Cf *Renovationis Causam*, 2. 'It is important to notice that, even though in Institutes dedicated to the apostolate "charitable and apostolic activity is of the very essence of religious life", such activity is not the primary aim of religious profession'.

[10] This of course presumes the importance not only of prayer but of a certain rhythm at every stage of religious life and particularly in the formative years of commitment and withdrawal.

conflict between the claims made upon religious by the wide variety of possible forms of action open to them is not going to be dismissed lightly.

The Secular World

The religious who has learnt to be open to the world and is aware of the christian significance of all genuine progress, will not, certainly, be tempted to consider involvement in any of its activities as a stigma, the mark of a second-class christian. Nevertheless, it is one thing to say that no profession not in itself sinful is inconsistent with christian holiness, and another to say that any such situation conforms with the *specific* holiness characteristic of the religious life. The grounds for making such a distinction are based on the consideration of different forms of activity in terms of their actual circumstances. As Rahner puts it, 'not everything in the world is capable of objectifying love of God and one's neighbour in the same way, and still less of manifesting the integration of the world's reality and the love of God'.[11]

Among the various forms of involvement in the world some are more in line than others with the direction of religious witness. There are secular situations whose object is the service of neighbour; through these the christian actually shows forth his love of God and others, manifesting the ultimate reference of such activity, even though this is not always recognized. The religious who serves his neighbour outside specifically religious or catholic institutions responds no less to the over-mastering needs of the kingdom, and protests no less directly against the world's sin.

Other work does not have this intrinsic meaning. It differs in the pressures it imposes, in the values that make its ethos. It imposes, of itself, no judgment of structures with which the Church cannot completely identify without losing her role of critic. Work that is entered upon for a wide variety of motives, ranging from necessity to ambition, cannot in itself be a positive sign of the love of God and neighbour. It is true that all work, if it is to be directed to the kingdom, which also means genuinely serving the human community, needs the transforming leaven-like presence within it of these very motives, and that presence supposes holiness. But from the nature of the case it is often a hidden presence obscured by the very ambiguities it seeks to resolve.

[11] 'The Theology of Religious Life', in *Religious Orders in the Modern World* (London, 1965), p 63.

This principle is vital. The religious who is not aware that his quite distinctive vocation, which possesses him totally, imposes limitations on his field of action is putting at risk his specific contribution to the world. Nevertheless, it needs to be added that several considerations point to the fact that the application of the principle may allow for more far-reaching involvement in the life of the secular world than the more conservative realize. One should not jump too quickly to conclusions with regard to a large middle area where only experiment and exploration can reveal the opportunities for working for the gospel at basic christian values. It does not do to think of witness in purely abstract terms and to forget that what makes religious witness is not just 'being there' but a personal style, personal relationships. There are still prejudices against the idea of wage-earning as such, and against being part of an ordinary working milieu. Perhaps, as we discover the implications of being subject to the 'law of labour', we shall come to realize that there is meaning for religious too in the insight of *Gaudium et Spes,* that working for one's living is also making a contribution to society.[12] If the principle is admitted that going to work is not out of the question, the problem that will emerge will consist in selecting work not simply by applying a rigid code but on the criteria of positively seeking the greater good, and, negatively, avoiding what threatens to make witness ambiguous and the life of consecration difficult. A paramount consideration here may be the degree to which a particular situation leaves the individual free to live by and to manifest his own values. As one religious has put it:

> There is the problem of trying to live right according to your values; and the pressures and practices of some kinds of work might tend to erode these values. So we do, on the whole, try to do work where we can control the values, the ethos, the practices.[13]

The general distinction between categories and work can guide choice; but it cannot dispense with discernment. This should be enough to deflect religious away from an exercise which might be tempting but in the end could only be slightly ridiculous – that of going through the various jobs that people do and rating them as suitable or unsuitable for apostolic religious. A more modest contribution to the debate would be simply to list the sort of questions

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[12] *Gaudium et Spes*, 34.

[13] Keenan, Moira: 'Growing Point', in *The Times* (London), June 23, 1971.

that need to be asked – and too frequently are not asked – by traditionalists and progressives respectively. Those who hold to the traditional range of religious works should ask themselves in all honesty whether they are not influenced by the fear of the new. While right in their conviction that religious life is defined in terms of being and not of doing, they need to be aware that what the religious *is* must find embodiment in a style and activity which amounts to a service of today's world, a response to the needs which are urgent today. They need to ask whether they do not attach too much importance to giving *surprise* (either to their fellow religious or to the world), whether they have not established too close an identification between giving witness and doing what one is expected to do. Those whose concern is to push forward the frontiers of religious ministry should ask whether in particular cases they are limiting their consideration to the meaning of a job for the christian as such, or whether they are really concerned with a possibility of acting within that job in a way that really lives and gives witness to a consecrated life. They should ask whether their project is fundamentally an evasion of their religious commitment or really an expression of it. They would do well to ask, too, whether they have sufficient respect for others in the Church to acknowledge that certain modes of christian presence, requiring, to be effective, the highest level of holiness, belong primarily to the laymen and to members of secular Institutes and not to themselves.

Ministry and Community

To turn now to the second question. Is it a betrayal of the essentials of religious life to work – even at a task otherwise in keeping with the religious vocation – outside the context of community? The question receives urgency today from the fact that we live in a situation where apostolate is not always best carried out through the agency of religious institutions and where wide opportunities are open for individual apostolates.

It will be well to start by attempting a sort of composite portrait of the religious who lay themselves open to the charge of 'individualism'. One might say that they are people who tend to look to membership of the institute itself for the primary meaning of community, community as the immediate context of their work being relegated to a secondary place. They are not worried by the fact that their work is not shared with others. Whether they live in a community house or not again tends to be a matter of

indifference; and if they do live in community, the model on which (whether explicitly or not) they appear to think of community-living seems to be that of the hotel rather than that of the family. They may well approve the closely knit community-life cultivated by some of their brethren, but would tend to consider this suitable only for certain forms of ministry. For themselves it is sufficient to think of religious life in terms of a loose affiliation. As a group, their ideas on community tend not to be explicitly worked out, but if pressed to justify their attitudes they might – bashfully and with suitable qualifications – cite the case of a lone missionary like Francis Xavier. It would be unrealistic to deny that their attitudes are based on an appreciation of the demands and limitations of the contemporary apostolate.

There are works which call for frequent travel or isolation; and these are not easily accommodated to the needs of community. In meeting the demands of the contemporary world and in accepting to work within its structures, religious will be led into highly specialized ministries which isolate them from community on the one hand and on the other entail close identification with other groups. The professional ethos of an academic or social worker may clash to an almost intolerable degree with that in which the rest of the community live, move and have their being. The difficulty experienced by those who commute between the harsh and heart-breaking world of the deprived or the exploited and the community which – justly or not – assumes for them the appearances of a middle-class enclave, is well known. To those involved in such situations community life is all too understandably dismissed as an unrealistic ideal.

Religious life today seems then to be confronted by apparently irreconcilable views on community. On the one hand, the idea that community apostolate is a distinguishing feature of religious life is dismissed as unfeasible (or at best relegated to the level of one among possible options). On the other hand, community is insisted upon at the price of being confronted with a choice between refusing certain otherwise acceptable ministries or carrying a burden which may in fact aggravate the apostolate to the point of overwork. Is it possible by means of a wider or more flexible frame of reference to overcome this apparent dichotomy?

The first point to make is that the term community applies on two levels, analogous to the Church. There is the wider community of the Institute or the Province (analogous to the universal Church)

and there is the immediate community (corresponding to the local church). The significance of the first should not be disparaged. On the level of witness it is undeniable that if the average man knows that a fellow worker or teacher or travelling companion or nurse belongs to a religious order, the fact will give a significance to that person. They will be identified with a tradition, and with a set of values. The fact of being unmarried would appear in a new light. A new dimension would even appear in their work, since it would be assumed that they were doing it with at least the approval of the community which has put them there.

The local community is a community that lives under the same roof. It is what sociologists would call a primary group. It would take us too far here to discuss every aspect of its importance, which includes the fact of its being a remedy for loneliness and the framework within which observance is made possible. Fundamentally, however, its significance lies in the fact that on this level – and only on this level – the communitarian character of witness and consecration attains its fulness; for it is here that religious life becomes an effort to live – and to be seen to live – on the model of the pentecostal Church, in oneness of mind and heart: a oneness which will be the more striking where the odds might seem to be against its attainment, for example in a situation of diverse age groups, background or interest. Such a community is the actual achievement of reconciliation, the point where the value for which religious life strives in the world is deliberately and manifestly sought after. It is also part of the eschatological witness of community life, showing that salvation is not individual but social.

The importance of community in this fuller sense cannot be relegated to the level of a side issue in the theology of religious life. While it must be conceded that the demands of ministry may place real difficulties in the way of every religious living it to the full, it would seem that to stand lightly to its intrinsic importance would be to evince a failure really to appreciate what religious life is about. The first thing to do, then, is to stress the importance for every religious of a significant degree of community witness and personal value. Something of the ethos and values of the primary community need to penetrate into the lives even of those who are obliged to spend a lot of time alone; which in practice means all that is implied by the spirit of brotherhood. It means communication and friendship, it means the seizing of opportunities to keep alive a relationship always in danger of atrophy. If actual com-

munity in certain situations may be somewhat tenuous, religious life of its nature should be understood as a tending towards community; accordingly the more the real demands of the apostolate can bear a truly communitarian stamp, the more the situation can be recognized as normative.

But the critics of certain forms of community life that are still widely commended certainly have their point. For much unnecessary tension is still caused by the assumption that apostolate is an addition to community rather than a mode of community. To demand that apostolate be covered by community considerations is only reasonable where community in turn accepts to be shaped by the real demands of work. What this is to mean in detail only experiment can show. We shall need to explore how far old institutions can be replaced by teams providing an effective community presence even when each member has his own job. The partnership of teacher, district nurse, social worker and cook has become almost a paradigm situation for the advocates of team ministry. How easily this sort of model can be put into practice I don't know, but as an idea it is not unattractive. We shall need to find out by trial and error how much diversity of outlook, interest and temperament can be effectively accommodated within an apostolic community without breakdown of internal communication, and how far it is possible to form specialized groups which nevertheless manage to reflect that element of unity in diversity differentiating a religious community from a club. We shall have to learn to achieve real solidarity in our communities, while allowing for deep involvement of members in other groups. We shall have to learn to offer hospitality as communities, to share together in local interests, without imposing intolerable strains on overworked members. To be sure, the special tensions of community life can never be banished before the eschaton, which our communities – at their rare best – only feebly foreshadow. But it may well be that many of our problems are false problems, arising from the fact that by and large the modern religious concern with the apostolate has outstripped concern for community, and that the latter probably needs more attention than it is receiving. Since community is one of the more central values of the modern world, and one which all apostolic work is concerned to promote, it would be strange if by goodwill and experimentation religious could not practise as well as preach that value in which the secular reaches beyond itself.