

RELIGIOUS LIFE IN THE 70's:

HOPE AND CHALLENGE

By THOMAS AQUINAS CARROLL

THE TITLE OF THIS PAPER, 'Religious Life in the 70's: Hope and Challenge' indicates hope that there will be an entity within the Church and the world identifiable as 'religious life'. It implies that the 70's will be a source of hope and challenge for religious life, and that religious life will be a source of hope and challenge not only for those so dedicated, but for all the Church and all the world. Pope Paul in his recent *Apostolic Exhortation* affirms both of these implications and holds that 'authentic renewal of religious life is of capital importance for the very renewal of the Church and of the world'.

Yet statistics register continually fewer american religious. Interviews with departing members disclose not only men and women who have no hope in their own future in religious life but also those who have no hope in a future for religious life itself. The sign of contradiction has been very visible: the declining numbers, the lack of vocations, the failure to understand renewal of religious by many bishops, priests, and laymen; the polarity of stance experienced in all our communities; the navel-gazing which has pre-occupied us; the selfishness which release from structures has surfaced; and the threat of insecurity which the whole school question in the United States places before us. Rosemary Reuther writes confidently of 'the vanishing religious order'.

The miracle is that most american religious, living with the overturn of previously venerable customs, are yet joyous, confident in the direction they have taken, inwardly assured that God is in the process, no matter how bruising and tortuous the flow. Our purpose here in these days is to study this miracle, to steady ourselves through reflection upon it, and to release its potential to others.

Almost ten years after the epoch-making *Constitution on the Church*, we are still at ease, even battling over our ecclesiology. In the years ahead, the question 'What is the Church?' will undoubtedly continue to be, in practice even more than in theological speculation, the ground on which the sword of the Spirit will be tested.

Throughout most of the twentieth century, catholics drew their concept of religious life from canon law. The code had clearly separated Church members into clergy (in hierarchical order), religious, and laity. The famous Chapter II of *The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, however, has revised this approach, and presents members of the Church first as all men called to life in and through Christ. This basic gospel truth is reinforced with reference

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to religious in the chapter on 'The Universal Call to Holiness'. This reversal of position has undoubtedly been unsettling; it has caused many a vowed religious to call into question a personal vocation and even the religious life itself. Such a reaction may lead us to wonder whether religious have pondered very fruitfully the admonitions Jesus continually gave his apostles against seeking the first places and striving to be the greater. The fact that decline in numbers has not unnerved religious or cast them into gloomy despair must spring from a confidence, born of the Spirit, that God is asking new things of them. They discern that the primary purpose of their existence as a force in the Church is not to provide an ever-growing supply of personnel for schools and hospitals, but simply *to be, to be holy*, and to make holiness attractive.

Human hope will centre in any group only in so far as that group develops the potential for Christ-life concentrated in all the people of God. Whatever hope we have for religious life must therefore be situated clearly within the universal call to holiness of every person. It must spring from and glory in the revelation that every single person created by God is called to become one with Christ: possessed of his Spirit, sharing with him a sonship of the Father in communion with all others in his body, the Church.

Does the recognition of universal oneness in Christ demean religious life? It would seem blasphemous to regard it so. Does this view sow seeds of a diminution of religious congregations? In size, very probably yes. Does it destroy our hope? Not if our goal is Christ the Truth. To discern him, we look about us with broadened vision and expand our love to see all others as just like ourselves, poor pilgrims touched by his Spirit. We rejoice to be allowed to throw off our blinkers.

The new vision of the Church and of religious life has reduced the number of candidates to religious congregations. It has also centred attention upon unworthy or insufficient reasons for choosing a religious vocation. Emphasis upon psychologically real freedom of choice has led to a better practical experience for new recruits of all phases of community life. Periods of time outside the congregation, opportunities to work and mingle with lay adults, and remunerative employment: all this forms part of the process by which the candidate is asked to look realistically at herself and at religious life before she makes a permanent commitment. The goal has shifted from institutional efficiency to effective witness, within which professional competence will probably be but may not be important.

The full implication of the insight of Vatican II into the Church eludes us. What it has generated is a new reverence for the work of the holy Spirit in each person and a consequent trust of lived experiences. The greater consciousness of the universal call to holiness and the simultaneous appeal to religious to be 'a shining witness and model of holiness' change the substance of the term 'religious'. They even call into question the use of the term only for specially consecrated men and women. It no longer represents a stylized apartness which develops a standard of religious practice unique to 'religious'. More and more, the term must regain its identification from

the deep and abiding experience of God expressed through day-to-day choice of values. The content of 'religious life' becomes the orientation to and continual refreshment of this consciousness of the present 'Day of the Lord' through the special modalities of evangelical counsels.

'Seeking God' has always been the strong motive within the monastic tradition, whether in an eremitical or cenobitic form. What is different is that, formerly, this 'seeking God' became formalized in special prayer, dress, inter-personal relationships to protect privacy within closed community, so that the individual person felt incorporated and spiritually safe in the total group orientation. For those who did personally give themselves to 'seeking God', everything in the apologetics elaborated over the ages offered support and defined their responsibilities. Today we are asked in the words of Pope Paul for a 'total surrender to the holy Spirit'. A disturbing Spirit, a driving wind, a burning fire, not a force apt to produce a tidy, well-ordered situation!

The revolutionary changes of the 60's in structures and timetables of religious life have not produced a utopia, but they have made us aware of the extent to which our life-style had been mechanized. They have made us conscious of how many of our ways of living were protective – protective against our own weaknesses, protective against any ruffling of external calm, protective against temptations which might well find response in the un-Christed areas of our personalities. The collapse of protective structures has freed us to be more real persons, persons involved deeply in the same fight against 'unspiritual' drives toward 'the world, the flesh, and the devil' that beset other frail human beings. It has enabled us to share in the hopes and joys, the woes and anguish of our fellow men; it has pricked our consciences when we have found that we are too cowardly or too selfish to share ourselves. Our christian hope has been pushed to new depths as it reaches for the reality that 'all things work together unto good in those who love God'.

The uncomfortable but sincere search of religious for new forms of prayer, the growth in ability to draw sustenance from sacred scripture and to trust one another in serious discourse, the iconoclastic attack upon lesser devotions, have all served to purify and to deepen the faith experiences of religious. The diversity which has appeared among us has called us to new dimensions of mutual acceptance, of love, and of faith. If we sincerely try to become other Christs, the theological virtues reveal their centrality in our lives. Hope is found particularly in the growing concern that faith-life may become ever more explicitly the basis of our life together. Some of our over-romanticized dreams of community have been lived through and discarded, but in very many cases they have yielded to our mutual acceptance of one another based upon faith. Hope arises from belief in the power of Jesus to form and transform human hearts. Love becomes our all-encompassing desire to support one another, to search out the good that the Spirit places in each person, to cultivate it until it produces healthy self-esteem in each one.

The service which a free-wheeling policy towards clothing can offer in establishing such a spirit is truly amazing. The only reference in the New

Testament to clothes is Jesus' word that we should stop worrying about them! When the word is taken seriously by a congregation of men or women religious, it performs miracles in deepening the theological virtues. It is easy to feel secure in faith when each one looks to every side and sees a replica of herself. Our faith is not so much in God working within each person as in reinforcement of ourselves through all others around us. Clothes somehow touch emotional depths and accentuate response. Therefore provision for diversity in dress can speedily challenge a congregation to spiritual growth and prepare them for a more christian approach to all of life. So also with our patterned life: love flows more easily to persons who reflect back to me my own values and standards of performance. Diversity challenges me to love each person for his way of being instead of for being my way.

All this clearing away of superfluities, this experimentation in new life forms, this search for better prayer-relationships, this reaching out to the multiple problems of men of our times, have seemed to prepare religious life for a new birth. There is an excitement within religious, an authentic joy and hope that a wonderful new entity is being born. Religious life as a single, identical and uniform structure is dead. But religious men and women in America are just about to begin. An anticipation, a trembling hope is abroad among us, a certainty (delicate enough to arouse fear of being trampled on) of a good thing about to reveal greater potential. The expectations of what this good and better thing may be cover the spectrum of the humanly possible. The one reality is diversity, pluralism. Religious congregations which do not plan and programme for diversity will have to provide for transfers out – and probably in.

A great new force is manifesting itself in the hearts of religious men and women. The infinitely-faceted power of the holy Spirit is probing and searching out personalities and broadening and deepening our concept of holiness, even the holiness associated with religious life. Pain and joy commingle with every birth. Provided we rejoice in the birth, find in it a reliving of the best of the past, and do not mourn for all the forms and formalism of the past, we have hope. We have the opportunity today to make our standards reflect the most important values in life rather than the artificial and conventional. Father Anthony Padovano is perceptive when he says: 'The demonic influence in life is evident whenever an age or culture takes seriously the non-essential elements of life and takes for granted realities by which life reveals its presence and purpose'. Religious men and women today are striving according to their own insights to throw off the demonic from their lives together and to build solidly on the most fundamental values of faith, hope, and love.

This effort must extend to the whole of our congregations and to all congregations. In all there must be conversion of heart, broadening of understanding, a new attitude toward pluralism and diversity, and a belief in persons which will stimulate their growth in goodness, their openness to God's work in them. We must take seriously – not write off or run away

from – the problem of polarization. We must take it seriously not only because it is of religious life but because it is a threat to peace and unity in all of society. If christianity has meaning, it must have something to say to conflict, something to do about it. At the disposal of christians is the reconciling spirit of Jesus, the constant intercession of his eternal sacrifice, the power of love which the Spirit can pour into human hearts. Our liturgy, our faith-filled relationships, our sympathy with the pain of adherents of diverse views will make us worthy participants in the effort to make our Church a source of reconciliation.

We have the opportunity to learn how to accomplish this in our communities. The teaching function, the explanation of theological and psychological reasons for new perceptions and ways of acting, the full appreciation of the good that has been done in the past constitute an essential programme for each congregation. Learning how to establish the climate within which confrontation is possible, the ability to reconcile conflict by promoting acceptance, by pushing debate to a higher level or a more basic principle, are skills which each of us should try to perfect. Appreciation of the healing power of Jesus, of the force for peace and unity which is inherent in participation in the eucharistic sacrifice, must come from our own experience of these realities. Thus formed in reconciliation, we shall have much to say convincingly to alienated youth, to a hostile couple, to those in political and economic conflict.

Community life will be validated as a christian model and will become valuable outside its own confines precisely insofar as it develops healthy inter-personal relationships and teaches us the process. Research findings of the behavioural sciences so effectively support the teachings of Jesus about man's treatment of man, that to ignore contemporary aids to personality development is to sin against the light. A concern for every person which motivates us to understand him, to reveal to him his goodness and potential to be better, is surely nothing but the carrying out of the command, 'Love one another', which we have so often tried vainly to make effective. To set free in another the potential to love is a godly pursuit. To use confrontation so skilfully as to increase personal honesty and group integrity is to contribute to the social enterprise. To share the experience of suffering so deeply as to restore hope is the work of a christian. The 'building up' of one another's self-respect and concerned love is the beginning of 'building up the body of Christ', which St Paul tells us is what we are living for.

Acceptance of diversity sets persons free to express what is in their innermost being. It imparts to each person the hope and the responsibility of arriving at a real integration of himself. Herein lies the hope and the heart of discernment, the opportunity to promote faith and to allow it to interpenetrate emotional and intellectual response.

In context the new insights into obedience and authority give hope of greater christian involvement, both personal and apostolic. Every christian has the duty of developing a conscience based on the word of God as found

in the sacred scriptures, and the universal living tradition of the Church, and on the human needs of his times. The role of the congregation in building upon this duty becomes threefold: 1) to respect individual conscience, 2) to help each person to develop a relationship with God – Father, Son, and Spirit – as well as an experience of others' needs which will enlighten the conscience, and 3) to provide aids and opportunities for personal discernment between the influence of grace and the demonic or selfish.

The primary determination to embrace the religious life must come from such a personal relationship with God – a being touched by him – and from a determination in conscience. In order to keep alive this personally established dependence on God's will and to keep it meaningful, the congregation should show increased respect for it and insofar as possible develop procedures which depend upon it.

One such development is in the field of work assignment, where open or self-placement is advocated. Open placement, or as I prefer to call it, apostolic discernment, calls for the individual to play a large part in selecting – within broader or narrower range – his apostolate and particular work. This procedure could be just one more bureaucratic technique which takes pressure off community administrators and raises, at least temporarily, the morale level of the community. It could be organized efficiently and used to promote a higher level of apostolic activity. None of these reasons really justifies open or self-placement, however, if the latter is inherently contrary to the objectives of religious consecration. If on the other hand this methodology can enable each person to find that apostolate and particular work which is most conducive to his fundamental mission of giving 'an increasingly clearer revelation of Christ' (*Constitution on the Church*, 46), then it is not only justified but actually called for by the renewal we are presently seeking. For this reason, I prefer the term 'apostolic discernment' to 'open placement'.

In the tradition of religious life, obedience has to a great extent been expressed in the willing acceptance of type, place and conditions of work. In this way each person's work became part of a corporate plan developed by superiors. Tremendous productivity, much development of faith and of submission of spirit resulted from this 'assignment' system, which made possible the great network of catholic schools, hospitals, and other agencies in our nation. Faith in the spiritual power of obedience influenced many a religious towards real self-development as a do-er. How many performed magnificent feats under the inspiration of 'I can do all things in him who strengthens me!' This remarkable history of human beings rising above their native talents, level of preparation, and education to carry on enormous endeavours is one of the glories of our history. Unfortunately in some cases, the work-value so dominant in american civilization minimized other values which have become much more needed in today's world.

The professionalism embodied in our works seems to have succeeded better than our ability to transmit the message of Jesus as source of hope and power of love. Therefore we witness a considerable move to subordinate task

to the possibilities it presents for the individual person to express God's message. Institutions may falter in the process unless a sufficient number of persons can be found in our religious congregations (perhaps through combined forces) to perform the necessary professional functions with that spiritual energy which will reflect the Lord's peace and joy through all their activities.

If open placement is to be worthy of the term 'apostolic discernment', it must become a source of greater individual concern for, discernment of and submission to the will of the Father and imitation of Jesus. It presupposes a readiness on the part of religious not only to experience the anointing of the Spirit but the willingness to be driven forth into the desert and to be sorely tempted. In the practice of such discernment and submission in the Spirit, each of us will have to ponder deeply the temptations of Jesus in the desert – an occupation from which we used to dispense ourselves rather easily because we were so well guarded from at least overt possibilities of these temptations.

Into the process of obedient decision-making come the demands of the beatitudes, the words and example of Jesus, as well as the particular goals upon which a congregation has agreed. To make our every response an obedient response should be our ideal – an ideal which renders even an apparently hum-drum life an adventure in alertness, perception, listening, generosity, faith and love.

Thus the religious person's response to God is made, in a more real way than under previous procedures, the basis for the over-all success of the congregation. The community rises or falls directly on the individual responses of its members to God's grace immediately perceived by reflection, prayer and a personal vision of human needs. In the personal discernment of every christian, obedience to God's will hopefully takes into account and responds to as broad a spectrum of human needs and responsibilities as possible. Breadth of vision and perspective are both needed, as well as the listening to God. Religious obedience does not dispense from this primary discernment and decision in the presence of God, the listening to him against the background of the invitations of our times. Because the response of the religious to God is made within community, it must take into account the members – both those with whom the religious lives and works and those charged with over-all responsibilities for the welfare of the congregation or its corporate parts. Personal discernment must fit into accepted patterns of community and/or congregational consensus or law. Perhaps it may need to be submitted for communal discernment or for the surveillance of particular authorities. Hence religious law will take the form not of absolute and minute commands, but of limits, guidelines, and organs for communal and inter-personal discernment.

Where individual conscience cannot be brought into harmony with group consensus or authoritative decision, personal development of faith may be called for – the willingness to obey in the confidence that God's blessing may

accomplish in other, better, ways the good that is conscientiously sought. Such a reliance on God presupposes that every effort has first been made to enlighten the group or person in authority as to the desirability of the conscientious decision. Submission under these circumstances, while more difficult, is at the same time more human and faith-filled than an automatic acceptance of direction in every endeavour. Therefore it inspires hope.

If conscience really dictates against submission, as may well be the case, particularly in instances of social concern, hope must be placed in opportunities for 'due process' in order that the vision of the group or of the person may be broadened. In those circumstances, hopefully rare, where persons may undergo misunderstanding and even grave suffering to accomplish what God seems to be requiring of them, hope in its deepest form of reliance on God's love may arise. The soul-searching and spiritual direction needed in such a situation may lead to real freedom in the holy Spirit.

Our pursuit of new approaches in ecclesiology must lead us to more creative study of the ministry open to religious as religious. The very mention of ministry makes some priests and bishops nervous. They feel that it is a plea for ordination of religious women. (That this question too should be raised and honestly faced in the Church is beyond question; but it is not holy orders that I am discussing.)

As we think about the problems of our day, perhaps the most omnipresent and oppressive is meaninglessness. The great challenge of the 70's requires that religious work to enlarge *meaning* within every sphere of activity. Not so much to preside over the eucharistic liturgy, but to search for ways to enrich its communicative qualities, both emotional and intellectual; to search out the breaking of the word of God which will pour human meaning into it; to render the vocal participation of the worshippers more satisfying, so that barriers to God's mercy may be lowered; to create a climate of unity and belonging that may cause men to emerge from their shells of defensiveness – these are human endeavours of the highest importance, to be cultivated within our community liturgies and offered generously wherever else we worship. These goals should prompt religious to open their own houses and make their own liturgies available to others.

Ministry is inherent in the spirit of joyous conviction with which we live faith in every domain. This spirit says to those who are inert from lack of purpose: here is meaning. The urge to make worthy enterprises meaningful will move us to look deeply into the educational process, to search out the reasons for student rebellion, to struggle to deal with frustrations generated by our technological mechanisms rather than capitulate to an anti-intellectual passivity.

To be agents of change in the roots of persons' beings, where thought and word and action have their source, is to help to redeem our faltering civilization. If we can demonstrate that our belief in God as creator of the world helps us to see and bring forth goodness in it, we shall indeed be messengers of meaning. Our conviction that man is lovable and loved by

God in an eternally continuing stance will help us to make man more human. Our consciousness of weakness in ourselves and in all men will lead us to call upon God's power of forgiveness and redemption and thus promote mercy and compassion. The need of man to be human and capable of dignity even in a terminal cancer hospital cries out for us to minister to the dying with more than tubes and numbing drugs, with articulated hope in the resurrection and eternal life, with the voice of concerned love and the prayer which echoes the sick person's need for deliverance and redemption.

In countless ways men today trivialize death in order to escape the self-discovery inherent in recognizing limits to self-sufficiency and to the hopes possible in this world. What a mission is open to religious in calling men to 'a radical call to take the decision of hope . . . for the gift of a new existence. We must help men to look at death, to see it as a frontier for man's freedom in the option it places before him between hoping and not hoping beyond the scope of this world . . . In the response he makes to transcendental hope, each individual interprets his own existence and decides its definitive meaning'. (Juan Alfaro: 'Christian Hope and the Hopes of Mankind', *Dimensions of Spirituality*, ed. Christian Duquoc (1970), pp 62-63.)

Reflection on the various ways of 'copping out', from the argument of 'the generation gap' through hippie life, drugs, membership in elitist cults and suicide, makes us aware of how deep and widespread in the meaninglessness, the despair in our world. As Fr Goldbrunner notes, 'Today extreme despair not infrequently occurs in the sphere of religious experience. This seems to indicate that the industrial and technological culture is only now beginning to have its full effect on the human condition'. (J. Goldbrunner, 'What is Despair?' *Op. cit.*, p 70.) Conversion from such manifestations of alienation demands conscious change to life with a new quality, a personal quality. And this personal quality must be called forth by another person. Are religious capable of assuming the ministry inherent in being (on various levels) this person who calls the other forth? This question challenges religious not so much to the development of psychological skills (though these are valuable) as to that 'becoming in the Lord' which makes of them authentic believers and spokesmen of his word.

In this context of the search for meaning, our own life as religious becomes fundamentally important. Our mission to the Church and to the world is primarily related to that aspect of life which is called holiness. Holiness is being possessed by and acting from the life-force which God imparts. The role of man in the quest for holiness is to provide for this life-force as generous and free a human channel as possible. In this view, the potential of vows as agents of liberation becomes clear and inviting. Taken seriously as the modality of our life expression, they provide that peculiar freedom that derives from a personal discipline, which results from a confident loving faith in oneself as loved and possessed by God.

To be poor in things in order to appreciate personal being the more; to surrender marital love in order to witness to the virginal love of Jesus for all

men; to submit all values to those of faith and confidence in God: such is the freedom to which the vows call us.

The challenge to religious life in the 70's will be the response to freedom. The question to be posed will be: freedom for what?

Freedom for prayer, that deep assimilation to Jesus through the power of his Spirit which leads us confidently to the Father. Prayer in solitude and prayer which shares vision and grace with others.

Freedom for community as a school in which we are made human and learn how to harmonize with others, where we create and profit from a climate of support in our growth and struggles, where we find the locus of our most creative and rewarding prayer life, where both the fire and the wind of the Spirit are recognized, protected, and flamed into service.

Freedom for the mission to which God directs us. Pope Paul's recent apostolic exhortation calls us to the struggle against injustice, economic, political, and social. It asks us to carry to the Church and to the world the principles of renewal already tested in our religious houses. It calls us to work for a conversion of thought among men who feel no need for redemption. It asks us to take seriously and enter sympathetically into the searchings of contemporary man. It bids us learn to speak in language which our world can understand.

The challenge of the 70's to each religious will be a re-living of the challenge made to every man called by Jesus to a particular service: the challenge to totality and to permanence. Here as in so many ways, St Peter can be our exemplar. When at the Last Supper he protested against his Lord's washing his feet, and Jesus answered, 'If I do not wash you, you can have nothing in common with me', Peter replied, 'Then, Lord, not only my feet, but my hands and my head as well!' Everything was risked when the good was a common life with Jesus! And later at the same meal, Peter pledged, 'I will lay down my life for you'.

Are we today less joyous than formerly at vow ceremonies and solemn professions? Are we haunted on these beautiful occasions with the thought of dispensations from such vows pending and granted? Let us allow St Peter to help us. Peter's pledge of fidelity might well have called forth the response, 'Words, words!' from the Lord, for it was followed by the colossal failure of his betrayal. This failure, humanly speaking, might have led to despair. Instead, it brought Peter to an act of trustful recognition of his frailty and of his need to depend on the loving support of God. Thus he finally matured to a point where his pledge of totality and permanence was integral to his whole personality. He would have further troubles, even to being 'put down' by St Paul, but these difficulties became not personal crises but only crises of understanding as he opened himself to the amazing demands of the Spirit.

How shall we religious respond to the challenge to totality and to permanence? By trusting the holy Spirit who prays, works, speaks within our hearts. This response implies a new positive direction for religious congrega-

tions. It requires the development of a new consciousness of mission, of being sent forth by God to respond to persons, events, needs. This response will be not so much task-oriented as person-oriented: the calling forth from each person of all that is most human. We will be called as much to *be* for persons as to *do* for them. The heart of the apostolate of religious will derive from their personal relationships with God and their identification with men. Some of their work may remain institutional, but even then its effects will be measured by the personal influence of the religious.

The task presented to us is momentous. As human beings we always fall short; we choose in 'either - or' categories. But Jesus is 'both - and', both God *and* man, able to understand our frailty, able to support and empower our hope. Let us trust him to show the way. 'The faith I love best, says God, is hope'. (Peguy, Charles: *The Key to the Mystery of Hope*, Intr.)

Sister Mary Thomas Aquinas Carroll, R. S. M., M. A., Ph. D., is the General Director of the Pittsburgh Sisters of Mercy. Currently President of the U.S. Leadership Conference of Women Religious and council member of the International Union of Superiors General, she became a Doctor of Literature (honoris causa) of Duquesne University in 1965.