

# NEW ATTITUDES IN RELIGIOUS LIFE

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**W**E ARE NOT laying claim to an exhaustive description or scientific analysis of the new mentalities emerging in religious life. This is merely a presentation of facts collected at random, related in particular to the central government.

## *The current situation*

One significant characteristic of this new mentality is fear of manipulation. Religious of the new style do not easily accept the standards or the choices of a superior who makes decisions for them without knowing or understanding them.

The new kind of religious have a similar reaction to those institutions and structures which tend to turn individuals into abstractions, constraining them within an impersonal exterior and abstract framework. They emphasize the need for personal relationships which is so vital today. For much the same reason these religious have a dislike for large communities. They are attracted to small, 'more human' groups, to the team which is geared to everyday life, where people really know each other and there is the possibility of genuine encounter and deep communion. It is in this context that the problem of authority and conduct must be considered.

At the end of one general chapter of renewal it was proposed that the new constitutions should end with this paragraph: 'Religious are to bring their lives into conformity with these constitutions'. One young capitular expostulated: 'An obligation! What we need are guidelines to help us live out the gospel'. This is the only sense in which we can talk about 'rule of life'.

At the same time, it would be misleading to conclude that the new generation is opposed to every rule of conduct and every type of authority. A recent enquiry among young people revealed that more than sixty per cent wished that their parents were more exacting. The religious of whom we are speaking want rules and decisions to be worked out in small communities by every member, the superior included.

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Everyone must be allowed to express his opinion and join in discussion. The superior is given no more than the possibility of having the last word — and not always that.

That the group has the primacy of importance is seen in the fact that formerly the Superior General spoke with each one of his religious when he made an official visitation of the provincial houses; whereas today it is fairly common for them to ask to be seen as a group. They make known their common problems and feelings. Only a few 'old-style' religious still ask to see the General in private. Again, over the question of nominations for the election of the future provincial, many now reply collectively; that is, a group of religious after discussion send in a single reply. Nor are these groups formed according to external or functional criteria, but simply on the basis of mutual affinity.

How are we to interpret these attitudes? How explain this need for a collective life-style, this reaction against authority? Is it a desire to bring more pressure to bear on superiors, or is it a general feeling of insecurity? The dislike felt for anything imposed, as well as the desire to live in small communities, has to do with the larger question of freedom. In religious life there is a tendency to equiparate freedom and spontaneity. During the last ten years, the liturgy has provided an abundance of examples. In the name of spontaneity, without which, we are told, no real prayer is possible, there is an unwillingness to accept prayer with a fixed content and rhythm, or imposed from outside the group. In the name of spontaneity and authenticity (allegedly the same thing) we have witnessed a very rapid and unanticipated change from latin to the vernacular, from the daily choral recitation of matins to a weekly office of readings, and finally to a prayer composed by the community which tries to correspond to the needs and aspirations of each day.

With regard to personal relationships, many religious today feel closer ties with diocesan priests, religious of other Institutes and the laypeople with whom they work, rather than with the members of their own congregations. Solidarity with their brethren in religion seems to them an abstraction which has little impact on their lives. Further, how can one ask them in the name of their Institute, of its aims and achievements in the past, to sacrifice their immediate apostolate which engages their zeal and has for them a much greater validity? Why should they care if the Institute is progressively less able to count on its members and is forced to close down houses, colleges and parishes?

In one Institute there are young religious who refuse to accept any longer the formula of profession laid down in the Constitutions. They demand a text in which the promise of obedience makes no reference to the Superior General. They claim that it no longer makes any sense. They do not know him, they have no relationship with him and never will have. The real reason for such an attitude would seem to be that to promise obedience to the General would be to accept dependence in an international Institute, with the attendant risk of being absorbed by an organism in which the individual would be no more than a cipher: the eternal, agonizing fear of losing one's identity.

It is not hard to guess the kind of criticisms levelled against the central government: by what right, for example, does it make the decisions about professions and ordinations? It is too remote really to know the people, their mentalities and their problems; its assessment depends entirely on the dossier, the paper qualification. Where a religious community is closed, and the people do not know one another, the problem of information looms large, and the drawbacks are inevitable. The religious of our acquaintance are crying out for real information: the truth, total openness, nothing hidden. The secrecy that was once sacred must no longer be an instrument or arm of government. Internal problems, explanations of decisions, results of voting and investigations, the state of the finances, those who leave — the statistics and the reasons: in all these instances there is a demand for true and complete information. Certainly we need to consider the advantages and disadvantages of full as opposed to partial disclosure. Bringing problems into the open no longer causes the stir it would have done not so long ago. Yesterday, if a professor said 'I don't know', he would have lost face; today he would be applauded. Then again, through the various kinds of exchange, frequent travel and means of communication, most facts come to light sooner or later. To manipulate or hush up the facts eventually arouses suspicion and a consequent loss of credibility. These are just a few of the problems which, in this age of mass media, touch the very heart of religious life and its mode of government.

It may perhaps be useful here to quote two individual cases by way of illustration: one concerns religious life itself, the other, involvement in politics. The first concerns an international movement which brings together religious from several provinces within one Institute. This group claims to have brought about a radical transformation of its structures. It has one very definite idea of what the Church should be: 'humanity, in so far as it is open to change, to hope and to the future'. It

follows that the Church must oppose injustice, hatred and oppression, and act as a revolutionary ferment within society, in the manner, they claim, of Jesus of Nazareth and the prophets. Acting prophetically within the Church, the Institute must present itself as a sign of contradiction, and apply the process of discernment to the values of modern society, in order to open it up to new perspectives. If the priest simply continues to play out the role crystallized by the sacerdotal ministry and pastoral obligations as they still exist, he makes it impossible for himself to adopt any critical stance. Sociologically speaking, he is stuck fast. Further, there are some who envisage as members of their Congregation laypeople, married or single, who are attracted by this perspective. And there are those who would like the Institute to open its doors to former members who have returned to the world. It is inevitable that ideas such as these pose questions of identity and of frontiers.

As well as controversy within religious life itself, there is controversy about the social, economic and political state of the world. The situations, like the motives, are extremely diverse. It is not difficult to imagine a dialogue on the following lines. 'You are meddling in politics', the controversial priests are told. 'Everything has a political significance today', they reply, 'particularly in a situation such as exists in our country. Even were we to opt out and say nothing, we would still be participating in politics.' 'But you are not in your own country, are you?' 'Where there is injustice, there are no foreigners; such an excuse is an evasion of the truth and a refusal of responsibility. Besides, it was not until we embarked on this path that we began to live the gospel in any real sense. If we have not consulted our superiors it is because we do not wish to compromise them. Thirty years ago, priests in the Resistance followed this line. The situation today is practically the same. You say we are compromising our Institute. But we are working for the Church of tomorrow. Perhaps we are condemned today; but tomorrow our brethren and our superiors will be grateful to us. Maybe, thanks to us, the Church will make its voice heard and our country will escape the threat of marxism. Oh, you think that decisions should be left to the bishops, do you? But our bishops are not always in agreement with each other. Anyway, as religious, we are less shackled than bishops and diocesan priests. It is through our greater freedom and our prophetic stance that the specific charism of the religious will find its expression.'

In the latin american countries, in the United States, in Europe and all over the world, commitment of this kind is becoming less and less

exceptional. There are arrests, imprisonments and trials. In one case of this kind, the attitude of a Superior General deserves mention. From the very first, he left it to a legal trial to prove or disprove the accusations against his men. All he was concerned with was their suffering. His affectionate and anxious care, his offer to board a plane immediately so as to be near them, the interventions he later made on their behalf: all this solicitude forged close links between him and the province to which the men belonged. At a time when internal bickering is causing the links with central government to disintegrate, this point deserves to be stressed.

So much for a general summary of the situation. Let us now look beneath the facts in order to see how new attitudes are making themselves felt.

### *The influences*

First of all there is the political method of the *fait accompli*. One of its minor forms is what we can only call blackmail. Of fifteen religious in a house, there are five particularly active, closely united priests on whom the community largely depends for its subsistence. 'If you don't accept our ideas', threaten this minority, 'we shall move to another house or go and live in an apartment'. In the politics of the *fait accompli*, there is an overt and conscious flouting of the law and the superiors. What is new in the situation is the systematic extent to which the procedure is employed as a weapon. 'Experiments' (a very overworked word in the religious environment) are frequently only camouflage for confronting superiors with *faits accomplis*.

Liturgy offers countless examples. Let us cast our minds back: the use of the vernacular when latin was still obligatory, communion while standing when we were required to kneel, communion in the hand when . . . , the stole hanging straight down when it should have been crossed, and now that the rubric has changed, stole over the chasuble — or perhaps it will be dispensed with altogether. There are many more and better illustrations. It is a slippery slope. Imitation and solidarity are contagious and rapid in their effect. They are doing such and such in that house or that congregation. Why not in ours? It is possible because it is already being done and being allowed. The more successful the method, the more likelihood of its being copied. Some religious seem always to be in the throes of one *fait accompli* or another. Some superiors would be happy to say: 'Draw up a list of all the changes you want. We'll grant them all, and that will be the end of the matter.' But such a request would betray a total lack of comprehension. The other

side would simply reply, 'We don't know what it is we want. . . . We are searching'. Some less imaginative religious are tempted to murmur: 'We don't know where we're going but we're going straight there'.

The Council called for the participation of the whole community in the decisions affecting life and conduct. Participation has become a general rule for the renewal of the Constitutions; and its structures have gone on multiplying. However, the right to be heard and to cast a vote does not imply the right to have all of one's ideas implemented. In some cases it is noticeable that religious who, a short while ago, were always preaching democracy, deny its basic principle as soon as they have the right to vote. 'A numerical majority does not necessarily express the will of the community', one often hears them say. 'The community is composed of workers and non-workers.' The conclusion is obvious and it is not a democratic one. Matters sometimes go even further. Realizing that there is no more advantage to be gained by participation, some religious register their protest by refusing to have anything to do with government. We know cases of men refusing to take part in the election of a superior, or to assist at a provincial or a general chapter. They claim that they do not wish to be party to what takes place there. This is a case of the non-violent confrontation, which cannot fail to poison the atmosphere. What has become of the *cor unum* and *anima una* which was the inspiration of all founders?

The rebels do not always stay on the fringe. When they cannot achieve their aims from the inside, some of them form pressure groups which try to influence the decisions and structures of their religious community from the outside. Modern methods of communication are used: newspapers, interviews, campaigns for signatures, radio, television. When they want to prevent their fellow-religious from implementing decisions, or to stir up student-support for a teacher whom superiors wish to remove, attempts are made to mobilize public opinion to force the hands of those in charge.

The politics of the *fait accompli*, the refusal to participate, pressure groups. We must add a fourth element, a fourth factor which occasions pressure for superiors: it is the generation, or rather the mentality-gap. New-style religious set great store by authenticity, and reject anything that smacks of 'formalism'. Naturally, they feel that the older members do not understand them and tend to judge and condemn them. They accuse the latter of an inconsistency between their actual way of life and the principles they claim to live by. They also claim that these older religious will always rush to defend their traditional rights and privileges. Are the accusers so sure of their own religious life? Are

they always completely open to others? The absence of genuine relationships and fraternal fellowship offends the new thinking. One Provincial speaking about two of his monasteries said: 'In one of them the religious pray together but don't speak to each other. In the other they speak to each other but don't pray together.' There are those, on the other hand, who are always looking back to the past, 'this is not the Institute', they claim, 'in which we made our profession'. In many Institutes the number of isolated religious is increasing. It is only thus, they say, that they can 'live in peace'.

These conflicts create serious problems. Old-style religious ask for houses and even provinces where they would be able to live 'as before', and have the right to take in young people and train them. They claim that others are allowed to form small communities and carry out all kinds of experiments, yet they are not allowed to return to the good old days of religious life. Ought these divisions to be accepted? Or should they be avoided at all costs? That is just one more problem to face amid so many others.

#### *Why the new attitudes?*

One reason only: the world itself is changing. In the past religious life was always a tributary flowing in to the main-stream of man's relations with his universe, his institutions and his fellow-men: there is a clear connection between the birth of the different styles of religious life and the state of the world of the particular epoch. The same is still true. Hence the questioning and the experimentation are rather attempts at making religious life present and meaningful in the Church and the world of today, rather than adaptation for its own sake.

In the task of renewal set us by Vatican Council II, we are finding that there is a new principle at work in our world which is having an ever-increasing influence on its evolution, and is radically affecting religious life. It can be expressed by Tocqueville's axiom, which he annunciated 150 years ago, though he could not have guessed at the destructive powers implied in it: the impossible become possible. Speaking of democracy in America, he said that when, in a given politico-social situation, what has appeared immutable for hundreds and even thousands of years begins to shift, the entire system is very soon at serious risk and is pointed towards collapse. He foresaw the disappearance of the absolute monarch in Europe, just as we in our own day have seen how contagious was the force of decolonization after the last world war. Scientific discoveries, the advent of technology, organization of every kind, have helped to accelerate the process, and have engendered a completely new way of thinking.

The impossible become possible. The idea may always have been in the minds of christians, but it was not until after Vatican II that it began to make an impact on the life and faith of believers. The Council acted as the trigger. The word 'change' is now firmly established at the heart of the most stable society known to history. If we do away with Friday abstinence, it seems inevitable that the whole life and thought of the Church, including the form and substance of dogma, will eventually be questioned. We have reached a point where the essential is no longer distinguishable from the peripheral, the permanent from the transitory. Now that the Church is encouraging its own renewal, there is a growing awareness that the life and teaching of the Church in the past has been for many an unchanging monolith. And when one dimension of the monolith is questioned, and there is no real discernment, the rest soon come under attack.

The changes we have mentioned are often demanded in the name of the gospel. It is reasonable to ask 'what gospel?' Or rather 'how is it being interpreted?' There is always a danger in individual interpretation that it becomes a demythologizing manipulation. At one end is the religious who wants his monastery to become a 'phalanstery', open to all comers. Yet in Christ's teaching we find neither obedience to other men nor a permanent commitment to consecrated chastity, nor indeed anything that could inspire the life-style of a religious community. We easily forget that the gospel is more than the sum of its words, that its riches can only be fully understood when it is read *in medio Ecclesiae* by the light of the Spirit. Here again is the need for discernment.

It is frequently asked why those who hold such extremist views do not leave the Institute and found new institutions answering to their aspirations? The answer is often given that fidelity to the founder leads them to distinguish between his purpose (or specific intention) and the way of life in which this purpose was incarnated. They add that as his life-style was influenced by his own era, so, as the world of the present is immeasurably far removed from that of the nineteenth, seventeenth or thirteenth centuries, his mode of life needs to be subjected to correspondingly more radical change. We need to ask how valid is the analogy, and how far can it be pressed. There is certainly a way of applying it which would eventually lead to the destruction of the essential characteristics of various types of religious life. The life-style certainly needs renewal in many ways, but in others — notably the vows — it cannot be altered without destroying the founder's purpose. To see nothing but the blue-print of the founder, to be content with his motivation, his world-view, his own special sensitivity; and, by



jettisoning the structures and life-style of the Institute, to deprive it of elements which are not merely its mainstay but the very soil in which alone it can flourish: these methods will ensure the rapid disappearance of the Institute. Seen in its own perspective, the specific intention of the founder — whether education, preaching the gospel, care of the poor and the sick — can continue to inspire men and women who have adopted a different way of life — even marriage; but that way of life will not have much in common with what the founder chose for himself.

A world in convulsion, controversial interpretations of the gospel, the claim of fidelity to the founder — and to these causes we must add a real problem of faith. And we must take care to identify it correctly. When the modern confrontation occurs, the superior's first appeal is often to the 'supernatural' aspect of religious life. Equally often, he is disconcerted to find that such an appeal fails to have the expected result. The trouble is that the instant invocation of basic spiritual principles sounds like a thinly-covered accusation of lack of faith, which may be deeply resented. It also carries a risk of obscuring genuine questions, besides siting the problem of faith on too superficial a level.

It is not so much a lack of faith which is the problem of religious, but rather a lack of credibility in institutions which have far too often failed to understand human values, and have not encouraged men to undertake responsibility for what they do, or to have a genuine point of view of their own. Too much time was spent on seeking or trying to maintain a kind of order considered as an unattainable ideal. Some religious fear that demands will be made of them in the name of God, which seem to have little, if any, connection with faith. They claim that ways of doing things, life-styles, a religious infantilism and situations generally frowned on today, found legal sanction under the banner of 'the spiritual life', and became hallowed practice. The spirit of faith cannot consecrate or ask others to accept unreasonable practices. Grace does not do away with nature, but perfects it: everyone remembers the old scholastic adage even though its message is frequently distorted. Besides, the appeal to the spirit is no more than a handy device for silencing dissenters, avoiding real confrontations, and generally dispensing oneself from finding sufficient imagination and courage to cope with the necessary renewal.

Lack of faith does exist, but not at this level. There are some young people who enter religious life wishing to deepen the experience of the christian and evangelical life which they have known in adolescent or student groups. It seems to them that only religious life can give

them that warm friendship, that awareness of belonging to a close-knit team, the opportunity for putting what is best in themselves at the service of others, the communal life, the encounter with God: all the things that they had earlier discovered together. There is no need to refer here to those who later realize that a home of their own and a life in the world can also provide these things. But among those who persevere, have they learned (has anyone tried to teach them?) to increase and deepen their perspective by recognizing God as the Absolute: God who gives to this experience its true meaning, who is its very cause, but who, when it comes to the point of staking one's whole life on the evangelical life understood in all its purity, is infinitely greater than that experience?

In all these reflections, there is one idea that recurs — discernment, with all the re-education of the faculties which it implies. For it is not *imagination* which is to be feared, but that *confusion* which empties all things of their reality. To discern, in the religious life, is not to proclaim that one knows what religious life ought to be, and that one is therefore in a position to give expression once and for all to its riches and potential. Truly to discern is to reach the conviction that the holy Spirit who does not cease to work within us (and who indeed would dare to affirm that the Spirit is heard less frequently today than twenty, thirty, fifty years ago?) sometimes works through unexpected circumstances and leads us along bewildering paths, churning up the soil lest the divine seed die, so that those whom he summons may discover the place where their aspirations may be fulfilled.

Are the new-style religious expecting something from central government? The reply is not in doubt and it is positive. Then what are they expecting? The symbol of some kind of unity? A middle way between old and new? Initiatives? Directives? A strong authority which makes them feel secure? It is not for us to take sides. All that can be said by way of summary is that if we are to judge objectively the characteristics of the new mentality, the following four questions must be kept in mind:

1. *A question of identity.* Judging from what their superiors say, these religious are not misunderstood in their searching, their need for security, their desire for authenticity, their love — however disconcerting its expression — of the gospel and of the Institute. But do they really feel that they are truly understood as people?
2. *A question of method.* When they adopt certain courses of action to bring themselves to the notice of their superiors — withholding

information, using secrecy as a systematic method of government, impersonal orders etc. —are they not in fact employing ineffectual tactics because it is their own sensitivity and their own character which is thereby damaged?

3. *A question of motivation.* Motives which may once have been effective are no longer acceptable: authority for its own sake, fidelity to the commitments and ways of the Institute simply because it is the Institute, solidarity within the Institute to justify a refusal or a course of action, the constant appeal to patience and trust etc.

4. *A question of values.* We need to try to discover the fundamental reasons, the real motives —or values— behind those disconcerting actions and attitudes, if we are to bring out all the positive elements of the situation. It is not difficult to discover the good in small communities or groups.

'The authority of the Church which is so much under attack today', said Paul VI in 1970, 'is actually there to study and provide favourable opportunities for reform; and to encourage the innovations which are needed by the ecclesial Church'. That must also be true of authority in the religious life.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This article is a translation of 'Un nouveau type de religieux' which first appeared in *Supplément* (1971, no 2).