

THE FUTURE OF APOSTOLIC RELIGIOUS LIFE

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THE TITLE chosen for this paper — The future of Apostolic Religious Life — is itself an expression of belief, of hope. By your choice of the title, by your expression of hope, you have somehow shared your faith, thus telling me something of who you are.¹ I am more and more convinced that what we need today are ‘Confessors’ (rather than professors), that is, those who confess their faith, who, like the first apostles, proclaim what they believe. I will in turn try to share my faith with you, my belief in the future of apostolic religious life.

It is primarily to the adjective ‘apostolic’, in the expression ‘apostolic religious life’, that I will address myself. Let me say that the word ‘apostolate’ is not the happiest choice, perhaps because of its almost exclusive identification in the past with ‘works’; because it was a compartment of life, complemented by other compartments, especially prayer and community. We could use ‘mission’, ‘service’ or ‘ministry’. But whatever the term, I am referring to that aspect of our lives directed to the service of others, to the concrete expression of our having been called to participate in the redemptive mission of Christ.

A certain *historical perspective* is extremely helpful in situating the future of apostolic religious life. A look at the past helps us to understand the present and create the future. We, like Ecclesiastes, sometimes tend to think that what we have known in our lifetime is what has always been. These past few years have at least dispelled the illusion that ‘what has been will always be’, but I think it is important to realize that what we have lived for the past hundred years as apostolic religious women is something ‘new’ in the Church. Today we live at a time when we can truly say that *apostolic religious life for women is in its infancy*, is certainly coming into its own. It is only in the past century that women wishing to consecrate themselves totally to God through public profession of poverty, chastity and obedience within a religious congregation could do so without having at the same time to *accept enclosure*. And yet even when their ‘right of existence’ within the Church was recognized,

¹ This paper was originally addressed to a gathering of apostolic religious women in London, England, in September 1973.

most apostolic religious congregations of women kept rules and customs which had long been treasured in the monastic tradition and which had served well in that same tradition. What most of us did not see for many years was that we were trying to have 'the best of both worlds', if you will. The *internal rules* of our communities were those well adapted to life in a monastery where stability and good order are certainly priorities. On the other hand, in our *apostolic, active lives, mobility and openness* to the unexpected needs we might meet were priorities. And so all kinds of dilemmas were created, dilemmas usually solved at the expense of service to other people, and in favour of our community life of stability. As a classic example: when the bell rang for office, what was the 'more perfect' reaction of a sister who was visiting in the parlour?

Another historical factor which plays a very important role in our coming of age as apostolic religious within the Church is the evolution of the position of women in society, a position which has changed in an extraordinary way in the western world in the past half-century. Never have women attained the level of education that they have today; never have they participated in so many areas of public life; and this evolution is by no means terminated.

When the Church at Vatican II spoke of communities in which 'apostolic and charitable activity is of the essence of the religious life', and asked these same congregations to 'ensure that their observances and customs be adapted to suit the needs of the apostolate to which they are dedicated',² it was truly a grace which has triggered a new understanding of apostolic religious life and a greater fidelity to what the Lord is asking of us in the Church today. As we understand more fully the life to which God has called us for the good of others, we become more and more aware of its richness and its exigencies. One of the most crucial aspects of apostolic religious life, as I see it, is integration. It seems of utmost importance that we see our life as one, that we see it, in other words, as Life. 'Apostolic activity should result from an intimate union with Christ'.³ This may even sound like a platitude — but it is not always so evident in lived conviction, in conviction which motivates action. It is the relationship to God in Christ which must be the centre, the axis, the motivating force of our whole lives. Somehow all our choices should be influenced by the reality of God in our lives, by the desire to know him and make him known.

² *Perfectae Caritatis*, 8.

³ *Ibid.*

The relationship of Jesus himself to the Father was the dynamism, the rule, the determining element of his life. Christ's mission flowed from that relationship. Because he was one with the Father, he could reveal the Father's own secrets. At the risk of over-stating this point, let me just select several passages from John's gospel: 'The Son only does what he sees the Father doing: what the Father does, the Son does. For the Father loves the Son and shows him all his works'.⁴ 'My aim is not my own will but the will of him who sent me'.⁵ 'The teaching that I give is not my own: it is the teaching of him who sent me'.⁶ ' . . . it is not I alone who judge but I and he who sent me'.⁷ 'I do nothing on my own authority, but in all that I say I have been taught by the Father'.⁸ 'I have disclosed to you everything that I heard from my Father'.⁹ Jesus's mission of bringing life to men was accomplished in the same act as his revelation of the Father. 'This is eternal life: to know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent'.¹⁰ Jesus was the one who, being totally one with the Father, was sent to dwell among men and thereby reveal his love.

There is *no other mission than that of Jesus Christ*. In his account of the Lord's choice of certain of his disciples to be apostles, to be sent out to others, Mark underlines the double aspect of this mission as exercised by the apostles: 'He then went up to the hill-country and called the men he wanted; and they went and joined him. He appointed twelve as *his companions* whom he would *send out to proclaim the gospel* . . .'¹¹

This participation in the one mission of Jesus Christ, in the revelation of the Father, finds *expression in works*. Those concrete tasks undertaken by religious congregations are — or should be — expressions of the one work of redemption, concrete expressions which may vary from age to age, from locality to locality. And that is where a certain amount of difficulty arises. How are we to determine the works of the congregation for the future? How are we to evaluate today their correspondence to the one work of Jesus Christ?

It seems to me that there are several criteria which congregations can use to determine works.¹² First of all, works should be undertaken through fidelity to the mission, the spirit, the spirituality of the congregation. The founders and foundresses of our congregations were motivated by charity which informed their particular insight into revelation, urging them to respond to certain needs within the Church.

⁴ Jn 5, 19-20.

⁵ Jn 5, 30.

⁶ Jn 7, 16.

⁷ Jn 8, 16.

⁸ Jn 8, 28.

⁹ Jn 15, 15.

¹⁰ Jn 17, 3.

¹¹ Mk 3, 13 ff.

¹² See my article in *Supplement to the Way*, 20 (Autumn, 1973), pp 139-40.

There was a strong evangelical preoccupation which motivated them to serve, and this preoccupation found an echo in others. If the Church has asked us to recognize and maintain the spirit of the founder, his specific intentions and the sound traditions flowing from them, it is because the gift of the founder, tested by the Church, is normative for the congregation. We are not asked necessarily to continue the works of our founders but to capture their intentions, their evangelical dynamism, their spirit. This return to the sources requires a certain amount of serious research, I believe, in order that what we consider to be 'from the founder' may be verified as authentically from him. This look at the sources — or rather this look *through* the sources to the needs of our own time — is never finished once and for all, since we never will fully have captured the spirit. Each age has its perspective. Serious research is needed also because each congregation has its myths regarding its origins, I suppose, much like our apocryphal gospels. While these myths can be very valuable and educative, it seems to me rather perilous to base the apostolic renewal of a congregation on them. This reference to the spirit and the mission of the congregation will certainly not give us 'black or white' answers to the complex situation the future presents to us; but it will, I am convinced, release apostolic energies and a sense of direction much sought after within some congregations today.

An element which bears prime consideration in the determination of apostolic works is the real need of others. Our apostolic congregations arose as a response to the specific needs of certain people in a particular time and place, in a particular historical context. The context of today's world, its needs, are not those of the nineteenth century, and we find ourselves in a very different situation from that of our founders. And the situation of the future — the twenty-first century or even 1975 — will be different again. When we speak of the needs of our times, I think we have to read these needs on two registers: universal and local. There are global needs, universal needs specific to our age, our society. Today, for example, we recognize a need for bread in two-thirds of the world, and we recognize as well a humanity crying out for community and for meaning. The dimensions of gratuity, of contemplation, of beauty, of silence might likewise be listed among those much needed in the world today. To be aware of these needs is not very difficult, since the means of communication bring them to our eyes and ears constantly. They must, however, fall on sensitive and courageous and humble hearts, hearts which are touched by human misery but which are not overwhelmed by the variety and the immense scope of the needs of man. It is not up to me — or to my congregation — to meet all the needs

of all men. Christ himself while on earth did not do that. A real humility will prevent us from becoming so overcome by the tremendous agony of mankind and by our own inadequacy that we remain completely paralysed.

It is of local needs that the gospel gives us so many examples. When the apostles are sent out by Christ to preach the gospel, Matthew says that they are told as well to heal the sick, cast out devils, to cleanse the lepers, etc. In other words, they are to meet the needs of those with whom they come in contact — and this as a sign that the kingdom has come. Matthew again tells us the criteria for judgment used on the last day: feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the imprisoned, etc. The needs of man are the needs of those around me: the lonely, the aged, the ignorant, the unloved. We could elaborate, but you know much better than I. What we cannot do is to think that all the lonely people, or the unloved people or the needy people are outside of our own communities. . . . The parable of the good Samaritan has a perennial lesson for us in this regard.

Thirdly, the desires and the aspirations of the sisters are an important criterion in the choice of apostolic ministry. Basic to all of our congregations is a 'practical faith', a 'living faith' in the call of each sister. God has chosen each of us and all of us. No one of us has had a choice regarding her companions in the congregation as a whole, and yet it is certainly not by accident that we find ourselves together. But if God has chosen each one, it is surely for the growth and good of the group as such and not only for the individual. He calls, knowing whom he calls. I think that the call of the apostles, especially Nathanael as John gives it to us in chapter I, is a good example of this. Within our sisters, within each of us, the Spirit is constantly at work, and sometimes makes very evident that he is 'creating all things new'. Those in authority within congregations must have great sensitivity to this work of the Spirit in the sisters, so that the group as a whole might not harden its heart to an invitation issued by God himself through a particular sister. The importance of prayer, renunciation, discernment is obvious here. I am far from advocating that each one 'do her own thing', as that expression is commonly understood today. I do think, however, that a congregation sensitive to the Spirit in each sister, responsive to human needs and faithful to its own mission and spirit, might manifest much more diversity in apostolic works than in the past.

In this regard, it is extremely important that we reflect together on *obedience*, that we come to understand more fully the implications of *obedience* within an apostolic congregation of women religious. I certainly do not pretend to see this area clearly. But what I — and our

general council as a whole — have found most interesting and encouraging is how obedience has in the past few months become a focal point of interest within the entire congregation — and this with no insistence on our part.

There is a phrase used by the apostles in the New Testament: they call themselves 'servants of the Word'. Basically this is what all our apostolic congregations are called to be, servants of the Word, obedient to the Word. When I say this, I do *not* mean that apostolic religious alone are called to obedience. To be a christian is to be obedient to the Word. 'You are my disciples if you do the things that I command'. What I am trying to clarify simply is what this obedience means for us as religious congregations and as apostolic religious. It seems to me that in stating the criteria for the determination of apostolic works — the mission of the congregation, the needs of man, the inspirations of the sisters — I am merely saying that these are the 'places' where we should look first and foremost to know what God wants for our whole congregation. In other words, a congregation can only be obedient to the Word if it truly seeks to hear that Word wherever it might be uttered.

When I speak of the congregation, I mean every sister within the total group. We have a tendency to think of the congregation as those involved in service to the sisters at the general level; or the province as those engaged in provincial government. But a true discernment of the call of the Lord to a congregation implies the participation of all sisters. Dialogue, communication and participation must be realities within our group and will be if we see ourselves — all of us — as the congregation, as the province, as women humbly searching together to live in fidelity to the gift given to the Church through us.

Having participated in some way in the discernment of apostolic work to be undertaken, I accept and support the concrete decision reached by those ultimately responsible for the mission of the congregation at whatever level, and I hold myself in readiness to be sent. All of what I have said implies this willingness to be *sent* wherever the needs of others might indicate that I should be. A certain mobility is essential to apostolic religious life. It is interesting to read through the Acts of the Apostles in the light of *mobility*. We get the impression that the apostles were men constantly on the move — sometimes forced to be so by events. Apparently, it was something like the death of Stephen and the consequent persecution of the Church which was the instrument used by God to give the Church an understanding of the mobility required by the apostolate. There are some things we are very slow to

learn. . . . The disposition to be constantly at the service of others, to be like Christ himself, the one sent by the Father, demands a renunciation far beyond that needed in the past to 'ask permission to do this or that'. *It is an obedience which touches all that I am, every moment of my life.* It is an obedience lived in conformity to Christ who emptied himself and took the condition of a servant, of one who was always at the disposition of his Father, becoming obedient even unto death.

Conformity to Christ is the most fundamental reason for our obedience. It is only the following of Christ, union with him, which can, in the last analysis, explain our obedience. But as we become more and more one with him, as the Spirit transforms us into the likeness of the Son, his dispositions become ours, his love of the Father and of men becomes ours, his obedience becomes ours.

At this point I feel it necessary to recall that all apostolate is really a *participation in the paschal mystery*. This means that even when we have discovered the needs of man and responded to them according to the mission of the congregation, in accordance with the talents and aspirations of the sisters and using all possible human means, we will know the failure, the lack of understanding and response which Christ himself knew in his own mission. It was through the great failure of the Cross that he brought us all to life, and our own 'life-giving' can follow no other route.

We have really come full circle. We are back to where we began — with the need for integration in our lives, the need for union with the crucified and risen Christ in his life and mission, as the motivating force and unifying axis in our lives. Perhaps if — in speaking of apostolic religious life — we emphasized the word 'life' and saw 'apostolic and religious' as expressing qualities of that life, we might underline the unity we are searching for.

And what of the future? The apostolic religious of the future will be women who — in all their poverty and simplicity — are women in love, women of compassion, women who believe that Christ is risen and is with us, who share that faith with one another and who proclaim it to others. Maybe we will never do great things — but neither did the One who is the centre of our lives. Where will we be in the future? What will we be doing? No one of us can accurately answer those questions with certitude. But one thing we know: wherever we are and whatever we are doing, God is faithful and he will be there with us.