FORMATION FOR MINISTRY

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THE PROBLEM with our time, the sage wrote, is that the future is not what it used to be. And for religious life, at least, a more real insight has never been divined. The process of past changes in post-Vatican II religious communities has now, it seems, been carefully and clearly described. History will not want for explanations of why change happened or how change happened or that change happened. Our historical debt to the generations that succeed us has been well paid. Sociologists and anthropologists and psychologists and theologians and historians and religious who left their communities and religious who stayed in them through the tumult and transition have all added their analyses to the academic question of how a subculture of grand proportion managed first to petrify and then to thaw.

The question now, then, is not: will religious life change? The question now is: will religious life survive? The question of what we shall renew is well behind us. The question of what we renewed for, however, may well be before us still. Yet, at the very time that ancient or large or traditional orders are struggling to renew and survive, new communities are springing up everywhere—charismatic communities, peace communities, and resistance communities, both Catholic and non-Catholic.

To talk about formation and selection, then, in a time such as ours when the past is well over and the future is yet unclear is no small task. If we are not forming for the past and the future is yet unknown, how is either formation or the selection of members possible? What are we forming for? And is there anyone to form? With a steadily declining membership in convents and monasteries the world over, is there a future for community life at all? Is the vocation crisis a lack of vocations or a signal of confusion or a sign of new things to come?

The purpose of this article is to explore the present impulses for renewal and direction in religious communities themselves as the prototype of religious organization and then to apply the experience

and questions of these groups to forms of Christian community that are still in their earliest stages.

The question of significance and spirituality

Given the number of young people who have spent themselves unstintingly in poverty programmes and missionary activities and international development programmes and the peace movement around the world, it is clear that the youth of our time are as idealistic and as generous as were young people of the past. Given the numbers who line up in droves for wars and money and education and challenge, not all of which are comfortable and most of which demand risk and sacrifice and self-giving, it is hard to say that they are less motivated than the youth before them. If gospel life in community does not thrive, then, the deficit, it seems, may not be in them. The deficit may well be in us.

If those numbers count, we do not have a vocation crisis in the Church at all. We have, however, a crisis of significance and a crisis of spirituality. But the search for significance and spirituality go far deeper than change and far deeper than conformity; they demand renewal rather than adaptation. And they demand unity of vision and breadth of vision, unity of community, unity of members and diversity of members at the same time. The problem is whether or not such a thing can be done. When is too much conformity, on the one hand, and too much open-endedness on the other inimical to the task of building community today?

Every community, canonical or not, must be built around a centre. In the past, for religious communities, the centre has been gender or ethnicity or ministry. There were women's communities and men's communities; German communities and Italian communities; teaching communities and nursing communities. Selectivity was woven right into the nature of the community itself. The 'None-other-need-apply' message was loud and clear. For those outlanders who did, assimilation and homogenization was the foregone conclusion. In these groups, how a thing was done quickly became a great deal more important than what was done. And, for all their talk of immersion in the world and identity with the poor, the distance grew between themselves and the rest of the Church until, in a rarified way, they soon began to emerge from their spiritual cocoons every day only to practise their trade at regular intervals and then, at the end of the work, to disappear into them quietly and unnoticed and together again at night.

After over twenty years of experimentation and outreach, many religious communities are now almost at the other extreme. In this period, it is often hard to tell what the community, as community, does and even, sometimes, what the community, as community, is. One at a time they live their poured-out lives in the midst of a busy world, good professionals and good people, but largely without context or identity. In these circumstances the questions of renewal, unity, selectivity and formation become one.

The old model says control is the answer. But where conformity is the criteria, only those can come who are willing to become what everyone else is. The new model sees commitment as sufficient. But if a sense of personal commitment is the only requirement, anyone can come who calls themselves called. I would argue that if significance and spirituality are the hallmarks of religious life, then the answer to selection lies somewhere in between these two extremes of sheer discipline and vague interest.

The key, I think, lies in the identity—not of the individual members—but of the community itself. It can be very difficult now to know what religious communities are all about. Even the most controlled, most conservative, most concentrated groups lack a compelling identity. Why enter to teach? Anyone can teach, and even in Catholic schools. Why enter to do parish work? More and more laity are doing parish work everyday. And why enter for asceticism? Negative discipline or asceticisms no longer, on the whole, either enamour or assure. Modern psychology and creation theology have both cast doubt on the value of penance for its own sake.

Post-renewal communities, on the other hand, show differences in extreme. What they often fail to do is to communicate a clear reason for being together at all. If the members do not live together or work together or pray together, what compelling purpose brings them together and how is it to be recognized, either by those inside the community or by those outside it? And who would know what it was when they saw them even if they did live together and work together and pray together?

Whatever the form, however, groups that demand a single profile of spiritual fulfillment and groups that require no identity at all each limit themselves to a considerable kind of sameness: those that are all together exactly what someone wants them to be and those who share only enough past things in common—

denomination, associations, training, language, ethnic identity—to be able to need little else to know who they are.

In order to be witness communities these days, however, I submit that selectivity in community must now become more a matter of vision than of ministry or good will. It is the vision that must both identify and determine the members, not works (though the works are good) and not personal preference and past historical profiles—though community life is indeed a good and personally enriching way to live that provides a framework for many of us to grow up in a culture that no longer exists.

The fact is that people join groups, not simply because the groups are like them, but because groups enable us to do together what we could not possibly do alone. Groups, in other words, become the vehicle of our aspirations. We do not join groups to be what the group wants to be or to do what the group wants to do. We join groups to become what we know we must become and to do what we know we must do and finally because, for us, we see that this group is the most effective way to be whatever that is.

The history of traditional religious life, then, demonstrates clearly that a group which does not know what it is about in this day and age will do one of two things: either it will force people to become something for its own sake or it will enable people to become little more than they would be without it. The question of membership and selectivity clearly becomes a question of group identity and purpose itself. The secret is not in doing different things but in doing things differently. The function of religious life in this era is certainly, more than ever, to be leaven rather than labour force, sign rather than subculture.

But if religious life is to be sign of the coming Kingdom of God, then membership can hardly be focused on single categories of people. And if the vision that propels religious life is global, it can hardly be parochial in its membership.

As a result of these realities, two concepts are emerging quickly among religious communities everywhere and among the newer forms of intentional communities as well. The first is the concept of the corporate commitment. The second is the diversification of membership among committed and non-committed, young and old, men and women, Catholic and non-Catholic. The question in the twentieth century becomes, what can possibly be called alien in the global village?

The corporate commitment: its relation to formation and membership

If the secret of a religious vocation is significance and spirituality then we have to ask ourselves whether the problem of declining vocations might not lie in the fact that somehow we are failing to demonstrate that, as groups, we are really concerned about the important things of our time in important ways.

We are seen too often, it seems, as doing either too little or too much. It is too little only to have schools when Africa is starving and the West is stuffing itself with nuclear bombs above the heavens and below the sea. It is too much to have religious in every kind of institution in the country but to have no clear reason for them to be there while the poor get poorer and the strong get stronger. Institutions, in other words, seem to weigh us down and individual ministries seem to fade us out of the centre of things, the core of things, the heart of things, the sin of things. In one instance, a lot of teachers call themselves religious and so people who are willing to teach become the membership. In the other situation, a lot of apparently independent professionals call themselves religious and so people who are willing to live a vowed life alone work with all their might in their corner of the world to live life well and to make it better for others. The message to new groups is clear: a task too tightly defined can cut the community off from the world it says it wants to serve; a task too loosely defined can cast a group adrift without purpose and without meaning.

There is another alternative, however. Communities with a corporate commitment rather than a commitment to institutional works or no clear commitment to any particular work at all form their members in its theology and its goals and then send them into all their personal arenas to spread the net of the commitment and leaven the system at every level, in every area, as a community.

A corporate commitment, in other words, is a community resolve to promote, effect or support a major idea or concept or beatitude or biblical truth that is compatible with the community charism and essential to the upbuilding of the Kingdom in our time, by participating in actions as a community and by investment of the individual members in bringing that idea to consciousness in whatever personal ministries they may undertake. A Franciscan community, then, might choose to concentrate on issues of hunger; a Benedictine group on issues of international peace; a Dominican congregation on issues of economic education; a missionary community on Soviet-American relations; a peace community on the

creation of an environment open to international agreement; a charismatic community on the renewal of liturgical life.

In each instance, the community as community would take upon itself the distribution of community monies to promote the enterprise or the presentation of community programmes to conscientize others or the publication of educational materials for the Church at large. Then, every individual member of the community would determine how to bring the corporate commitment to their own life works and milieu. Older members might form prayer groups or talk to their families about the question. Younger or more active religious would bring the issue into their own hospital work, or classrooms, or parishes, or programme themes. Here diversity is of the essence of witness. Here differences become the strength. Here significance and spirituality are yoked. Here people see a community at work, promoting, tithing, supporting, enabling, educating, energizing. Here you find a peacemaking community, or a liberation community, or a social-justice community, not a religious organization with a few 'peaceniks' or feminists or social activists in it. Here every situation is a situation for ministry and every additional person strengthens the community outreach. What the community stands for, it stands for as an entire witnessing group. And people can see it and know it because the same message is coming from everywhere, both individually and as a group.

In this situation, formation depends on bringing the gospel to the here and now, on steeping the members in the theological, spiritual, communal, liturgical, ascetical and professional implications of the issue. And membership selection becomes a matter, then, of determining only who is intent on bringing the gospel to the human condition rather than of bringing a person to a specific task.

Significance is guarded by a regular review of the corporate commitment for relevance and urgency and human need. Spirituality is geared to developing in the members the qualities necessary to weld both the community and the members together by enabling them to grow in the virtues and insights needed to become a community of peace or equality or compassion or justice.

Leaven and witness, breadth of association and breadth of response quickly begin to mark the community with a corporate commitment. Neither control nor individual good works are enough to describe the character of this kind of a community. The corporate

commitment makes it necessary for the group to work together, to be something together, to stand for something together. Imagine the impact on the world if 100,000 religious decided on any given day of the week to go to jail together to end the nuclear arms race as they once decided to go to schools together to end illiteracy.

The relationship between selectivity and membership

But communities with a definite ministry who are clearly open to the world and open to its multiple peoples will become significant to all sorts of people: to the poor, to the disenfranchised, to the powerless, to the oppressed, to the charismatic, to the prophetic, to the young, to the old, to men and to women, to the married and to the single. And then the question becomes, how can all of these differences be reconciled? Is this really one community or is it no community at all. Is such a conglomeration of people really possible? And if so, how?

In the first place, a community with a new focus on meaning and ministry suddenly discovers that all the categories that once hemmed it in or hemmed it out no longer hold. The sacred and the secular are forever joined. Like Jeremiah calling the people to live their political lives in the spirit of the God who called them to be a people, the community that finds itself with the task of enabling creation to go on creating in our day can hardly call any way that is possible unclean or anyone who wants to do it unacceptable. The person who answers the phone in the housing co-op is ministering as much as the person who leaflets the Federal Housing Office. The member who works in what is apparently a totally unrelated position to earn enough money to enable the community to have some of its members work for no pay at all with the homeless in the city parks is as involved and as significant as the members who manage the community low-rent housing project. Employed and unemployed, the active and the retired, the agents of the institution and the separately employed members, the prayer leaders and the social activists, then, are all part of the same great ministry, all carriers of the same great work, all builders of the same gospel world, all holders of the same social impact.

No wonder, then, that people once not called 'religious' begin to gravitate toward the community and draw their energy from it and look to it for leadership. No aliens here, the entire Christian community finds something of meaning and membership begins to take several forms: those for whom the core community will be

their entire life, their sole identity, the totality of their focus; those for whom the community becomes a spiritual and apostolic guide; and those for whom the community becomes a sign of hope of the unity of all whether they themselves share the same tradition or not.

Professed members, core members, associates, oblates, co-disciples or whatever the terms used to designate different forms of community identity, these people all drink from the same spring and carry the freshness of it together. People begin to enter the community at all ages, from all walks of life, with no specific work but only the creation of an alternate world and a spiritual way of life in mind. And the community begins to see them, not as people to be re-formed but people to be integrated into the vision of the whole.

In monastic communities the sharing of life and prayer and ministry together becomes the staple of their witness. In apostolic congregations the conduct of the mission out of a common gospel perspective becomes the order of the whole. In intentional communities, too, the life-style and work must become secondary to the group intention to be a gospel group, or when cultural change comes, change kills. But whatever form the community takes, there is no doubt that here is a group made up of several groups perhaps but all gathered together around the gospel alone for the sake of the world. There are no aliens here, either within the core community or outside of it. This kind of religious life is about world-building from the vantage point of the gospel.

Communities such as these know, as did the disciples on Mount Tabor, that the function of community life is spiritual transfiguration but that community life is not a place for building booths. It is only the starting point from which they must travel with the newly magnetic Christ to the crowded, dirty, needy towns below.