BEYOND THE LIBERAL MODEL

By MARY JO LEDDY

A NEW BOOK appeared on the shelf of our novitiate library in the fall of 1963. The title, *The nun in the world*, seemed rather strange to me at the time. As I had just made the decision 'to leave the world' forever, I wondered what this title could mean. I sensed, even then, that it meant all the difference in the world.

Those of us who entered religious life in the early 1960s would be the first generation formed almost entirely by the vision of Vatican II. Although I had entered a traditional form of religious life, within months I found myself taking up the challenge which Cardinal Suenens had articulated in his small book. In the years which followed, much of my time and energy was engaged in the process of shaping a more liberal model of religious life. Together with many other religious women, I experienced the profound joys and the real suffering involved in the struggle to renew our way of life.

In recent years, my perspective on the liberal model of religious life has begun to shift. I no longer see it as an ideal but simply as an extremely important phase in the development of religious life. Because this liberal model is the predominant mode of religious life in North America, I would suggest that the future of religious life on this continent (and perhaps elsewhere) will depend on our willingness to explore the possibilities and limitations of this model in the hope of moving beyond it.

It has not been easy for me to sustain the critical aspect of this exploration because it also involves a process of self-critique, a critique of much of the way in which I have lived my religious life. This process has been made even more difficult by my awareness of the way in which some Church officials and representatives of the New Right have tried to make 'liberalism' a dirty word in order to justify their own position.

However, while the self-criticism of religious has become more problematic, it has never been more necessary. Our future will be

as real as our committment to a realistic assessment of our present situation. To admit that there are problems with the liberal model of religious life is not to assume that this is the personal problem or fault of those who are living this way of life. It does presume that there is a cultural problematic and that the crisis in the liberal model of religious life reflects the wider and deeper crisis of liberalism in the West.

Coping with historical decline: liberalism and conservativism

Historians in the future may well reflect on the curious fact that many religious chose to become 'relevant' to the modern world in the mid 1960s precisely at the point that this world was almost past its prime.[1]

Whether we know it or not, those of us who live in the western world are going through a massive shift in historical consciousness: from a consciousness of being part of a well-developed world to an inchoate awareness of being part of a declining culture. This shift in consciousness makes all the difference in the world and is of crucial significance for religious life. Periods of shifts in historical consciousness have always been times during which there was a shift in the model of religious life—the founding of new communities and/or the revitalization of existing congregations. These were also the times when some congregations ceased to exist or moved into a survival pattern.

The process of historical decline is only beginning to be articulated but the truth of this perception is being recognized.[2] It is important for religious to reflect on this process of decline because, to the extent that we have become part of the modern world, we probably have internalized some of those patterns of decline within religious life.

The decline of the American Empire is an award-winning film by Quebec director Denys Arcand. In the opening scene, we hear an articulate and rather jaded academic give her analysis of the present state of affairs to a young reporter. In a time of historical decline, says the professor, people cease to invest their energy in a common social project and turn towards more individually-oriented projects such as personal development and the fulfillment of the self. Only in developing societies, she lectures, is there a social vision which is compelling enough to invite individuals to transcend their personal interests for the sake of something greater.

The guiding image of this film has found a more extensive analysis in the writers of 'the school of decline'.[3] These writers prefer to focus their attention on the decline of America in particular rather than on the decline of the West in general. They are not suggesting that America will cease to be an important world power overnight but they are suggesting that it will no longer be the political and economic centre of the world. They refer to the emerging importance of the Pacific-rim countries and to the fact that America is now the largest debtor nation in the world. This fact in itself indicates the extent to which America has ceased to invest in the future and is more interested in living for the present moment.

The difference between a declining or developing society, so the film by Denys Arcand suggests, has everything to do with the relative strength or weakness of the common social vision within which an individual lives. Every social movement or political experiment begins with a vision which animates it and draws it forward. It is a vision which compels the response of those who share it. A common social vision or ideal is something which people aspire to, are exhilarated by and are willing to make sacrifices for. It transforms present actions and interprets it in terms of future possibilities. The fading of that vision coincides with the dissolution, whether dramatic or gradual, of the movement or socio-political institutions in which it is embodied.

The effort to cope with the loss of an overarching social vision and an imperative sense of the future takes at least two significant shapes within North America today: to use familiar terms, they can be called the 'conservative' and the 'liberal' political options.[4] My purpose in sketching the outlines of these two political options is to give an initial sense of how both of these options have become ways of coping (in society and in the Church) with the experience of historical decline.

The conservative effort (on the part of many and diverse groups) is directed towards bringing back some order and meaning in society. Quite simply, conservatives are concerned about the chaos and confusion they perceive in the lives of individuals and society. Thus, their concern about family values, morality and tradition. Although I have little sympathy for the solutions which the New Right offers to the problems of America, I do sense that they are closer to naming the heart of the matter than many give them credit for. 'They (the New Right) have tapped into the deep and

legitimate need of the American people for a sense of direction, meaning and commonly held values in public life.'[5]

However, this conservative effort at coping is doomed to fail for at least one important reason: a common social vision cannot be imposed. Such a vision arises through the creative, rather than the coercive, use of power. The coercive use of power is a characteristic pattern of an empire in the state of decline. Ultimately, the conservative way of coping with social decline blinds its adherents to the extent to which they are subtly perpetuating the patterns of decline even as they attempt to come to grips with its disintegrating effects.

In order to understand the inadequacy of the liberal attempt to cope with the experience of historical decline, it is important to examine some of the limitations inherent in the original assumptions of liberalism.[6] Liberalism is based on a philosophy which flowered in the nineteenth century and which served to articulate the 'beliefs' of the emerging economic order of industrial capitalism. Liberalism saw the 'free market' as an interaction of conflicting individual interests which would eventually result in the greatest good for the greatest number of people.

Liberalism did not then, and does not now, begin with an integrating vision of the whole but rather with the assumption that the individual is the starting point in economic, political and social arrangements. This is a world-view based on the belief that the common good shall result from the self-actualization of each part. Thus, liberalism is inherently sympathetic to pluralism and stresses the social virtues of tolerance and respect for individual rights. The role of government in a liberal society is that of managing and balancing the various conflicting interests in the economy and society. This is a facilitational rather than a directional role.

The contributions of a liberalism to western civilization have been many. Its emphasis on freedom of conscience and the tolerance necessary in a pluralistic society can be fully appreciated only when one recalls the various forms of authoritarianism that preceeded it. Yet, however much we may appreciate this, the limitations of liberalism are becoming more obvious. This is most evident in the area of the economy. Liberalism works as long as the economic pie keeps expanding enough to sustain the belief that there will eventually be more for everyone if the market forces are allowed to have their way. Liberalism falters, as it is today, when the economic pie begins to shrink. In a situation of scarcity, liberals

are faced with the necessity of making a choice between the benefits
to some at the cost to others. But what would be the basis for such
decisions? Bereft of any common social vision, there is little basis
for appealing to anything beyond self-interest.

This leads us to consider the most serious limitation of liberalism
as a way of coping with a process of historical decline—its intrinsic
inability to respond to the very deep human need for a common
meaning and vision. People cannot live by freedom and tolerance
alone. When 'the original concern with meaning is frustrated, we
turn to pleasure or power'.[7] Liberalism contributes to the cause of
the crisis of meaning in the West without offering any way of
resolving that crisis.

Liberals are inherently suspicious, at this time, of any attempt
to impose an order on society and seek to retrieve some sure space
for individual freedom and development. However, this liberal way
of coping with historical decline ultimately perpetuates another
pattern of a declining empire—the disintegration of common
meaning.[8]

Liberals and conservatives today are alike in that their patterns
of coping with the decline of the empire mirror within themselves
the patterns of that declining empire. As such, they offer no hope,
no alternative for the future.

Coping with disintegration in religious life

It is tragic, but all too often true, that liberals and conservatives
in the Church are so busy fighting each other that they lose sight
of how both groups reflect and even reinforce the patterns of decline
in the culture.

My sense is that the liberal and conservative ways of coping
with the loss of a common vision are present within most religious
congregations, to a greater or lesser extent. (Although it is true
that all congregations have a statement of charism or mission, few
of these statements are really operative visions which compel
passionate generosity and energetic self-sacrifice.) I will mention
briefly one of the conservative patterns of coping and move then
to reflect more on the liberal ones.

In the face of the experience of decline, conservatives seem more
tempted to try to manufacture some sense of order in a situation
which they perceive as chaotic. Within North America, this attempt
at ordering rarely involves the blatant exercise of authority to
achieve the desired result. More often than not, these conservative

efforts (which can exist in even the most liberal congregations) become an attempt to order the world—through paper. Papering over the cracks in meaning: many papers with guidelines, procedures and structural precisions become the means used to bring a certain order into a congregational house. This effort to order and clarify may help to conserve some of the energy being sapped by confusion but it does little to re-energize a congregation. The history of most communities suggests that only a shared sense of vision brings real clarity and a sustained sense of direction.

In my work as a resource person for several more liberal congregations, I have noted some patterns which indicate the ambiguities of trying to operate in a time of decline (declining numbers, declining financial resources etc.) in the absence of a vital and common sense of meaning:

1. Statements of mission or charism which are vague and general enough to include all the various interests in a congregation.

2. Difficulty in making choices, particularly in the area of long term planning, because there is no deeply shared vision upon which to base these choices.

3. An emphasis on the personal growth and development of the members. A tendency to interpret community in terms of the needs of the members, work as an individual project and spirituality as a private concern.

4. The near impossibility of sustaining corporate commitments.

5. An increasing difficulty in finding persons for leadership positions. This is not surprising since the service of leadership, by definition, involves a care for the whole.

6. An emphasis on the liberal virtues of leadership: tolerance, respect for the person, openness to new possibilities. The need for leadership skills in the area of balancing and reconciling (managing) the various interests in a congregation.

7. If liberal-type leaders cannot easily be found, a congregation may sometimes opt for electing leadership groups which are inherently 'balanced', i.e. representative of the various interest groups within the congregation. It is one way of ensuring that no direction will be taken and few real choices will be made.

8. A strong belief that most problems can be solved by improving group dynamics and communications. Salvation by interaction.

9. Resolving conflicts through negotiation and compromise. Because there is no authoritative vision within which to resolve substantial conflicts, liberals tend to negotiate or compromise or to

legitimize all sides of the conflict by expanding the range of options within a given congregation. This diffusion of conflicts may create a temporary sense of harmony but it also tends to diffuse the sense of common meaning even further.

10. Difficulty in establishing a formation programme which engenders the support of all the members. Because there is usually such a diversity of models of religious life within a liberal congregation, there is no one model of formation which will satisfy all the various visions of the future.

11. A concern with the uses and abuses of authority (models of government etc.) because there is no common authorizing vision to which all members can refer.

12. A tendency to be more critical of the conservative Church than the culture in which the congregation is situated—it is difficult for a congregation which has internalized the cultural patterns of liberalism to be critical of that culture.

13. Basing corporate identity on a shared past or on personal relationships in the present. In many liberal congregations it is the shared future which is in question.

One could go on. However, it may be important to reflect a little more deeply on the deeper dilemmas created by the emphasis on pluralism within the liberal model. This pluralism was a significant and much needed step (at the time of Vatican II) beyond the stifling uniformity which was present in the more traditional model of religious life. Twenty or so years later, there is reason to wonder whether this pluralism has become an end in itself—a pluralism without purpose.

Liberal communities tend to be extremely tolerant of a wide variety of lifestyles and ministries. In some congregations this pluralism has become so great that it is difficult to see what remains in common in any vital sense. Members have some vague sense of belonging to a group. This sense of belonging is usually sustained by a vague ethos or spirit, by memories of a shared history, by a sense of responsibility for the elderly members and by personal relationships with those who are co-workers, co-inhabitants or like-minded allies. *But belonging is not the same as commitment.*

The resulting unity is often the most minimal sense of unity which is easily fractured by any issue or reality which demands a corporate choice. It also results in what Michael Crosby has called a 'moral minimalism' in the shared realities of the everyday.[9] Liberal communities are held together by an agreement, stated or

unstated, to do the minimum together. Soon the minimum seems to be the normal requirement of belonging to a religious community. We become content with a few meetings, a few times of prayer and an occasional party to sustain our sense of belonging. Anyone who wants to do more is labelled a fanatic. The problem in some liberal congregations is not that members are 'dropping out' of religious life but that they are merely 'dropping in'.

Let me relate a conversation with a sister who did leave her congregation recently. 'I left,' she said, 'because I had no reason to stay'. This is one of the starkest statements I have heard of the crisis of meaning in the liberal model of religious life.

One other conversation reveals the dilemma of more liberal religious life at this point. A former provincial said to me, 'We are treading water. We don't want to go back but we don't know where ahead is'. Conservatives may dream the impossible dream of going back but liberals are caught treading water. However, it would also be an illusion to think we can keep treading water for long. We will either start to go with the cultural flow of things or just get tired. What would it mean to go ahead? To go beyond the liberal model of religious life?

Discovering new meaning

At this point in the history of religious life, we are in an in-between moment, a 'dark night', when the former models of religious life are disintegrating and a future model has yet to become clear. The conservative model of religious life no longer seems viable except for a very few groups. However, as the memory and vitality of this conservative model begin to fade, some of the energy and legitimation of the liberal model begin to wane. Those who have a vivid memory of the traditional model of Church and religious life seem more clear about the value and significance of the liberal model of religious life. But does the liberal model make sense in itself, i.e. without reference to the more traditional model? There are those who, like myself, never knew the traditional model or never knew it for long. We know the liberal model was launched from the base of traditional religious life, but we are beginning to wonder whether there is enough fuel in the liberal model itself to take it very far. To use another metaphor, we are beginning to feel that driving a liberal model of religious life is like driving into the future through a rear-view mirror.

Our challenge is to learn how to be in this dark night in a way which opens up the possibility for the future. It is all too easy to attempt to escape the uncomfortableness of this time by manufacturing different projects or programmes in an effort to try to fabricate some sense of meaning and purpose. It is also tempting, in both liberal and conservative congregations, to try to see formation as the way of providing sense of the future. The over-investment of energies in formation can indicate that a congregation is expecting the process of formation to compensate for the inability or unwillingness of the members to face the challenge of creating a future together.

None of this will resolve the crisis of meaning in religious life at this time. Meaning is not something which can be manufactured. It is something which can only be discovered. There are perhaps two attitudes which are important in engaging in the search for a new meaning in religious life. The first would be an attitude of trust—the belief *that* there is meaning in this in-between moment even if it is not clear exactly *what* this meaning is. This is not a better or worse time to be in religious life. This is the only time in which we are called to become disciples of Jesus. This is our time, our *kairos* and, in the end, God's time. The second attitude would be the honesty involved in saying what has become meaningless in religious life. Paradoxically, by refusing to give meaning to what has become meaningless, we can help to restore some sense of what could be meaningful. In marking out the limits of meaning, we set a certain boundary to meaninglessness.

In order to discover meaning in a dark time, we also need to discover those places or spaces which help us to position ourselves, as it were, for the future. Our challenge is to discern where those spaces are now. Where does the future claim us as its own?

Within the limits of this article, I will briefly indicate two ways in which we can place ourselves in a position to discover the meaning and future of religious life.[10]

Placing ourselves together in prayer

If we grant that a vision, a shared vision, of the future must be discovered rather than fabricated where will it come from? It will come from the deepest level of our lives, from the level where our communion with God coincides with our community with others. This is the level of life which is far deeper than the conscious levels on which we usually live (the psychological or social levels). We

need to believe in this and act on this belief. We need to be together in prayer regularly and for a very long time. This implies far more than 'shared prayer' which tends to move on a more conscious level. A common vision is more than the sum of the private dreams of the individuals who call themselves a community.

This prayer must be nourished by the symbols and stories of our faith. We live in a culture which so stimulates our imaginations that our souls are left too numb for visions. Consumerism leaves us with a craving, not for visions but for illusions. Our imaginations are being stunted, our hearts weakened and our souls shrunken to a shadow of our truer selves. We need to nourish an alternative imagination by a frequent reading and praying of the scriptures. Then it may be more possible for these stories to merge with our own story and transform our unconscious from within. A space opens within from which we discover the possibility of co-authoring a vision which is authoritative.

When we pray together, in silence or through the words of scripture, we hold ourselves in readiness for a vision. Perhaps we need to reflect more on the conditions which create the readiness and willingness for visions. Visions are more easily recognized when they are awaited, longed for and expected. If community is only functional, a base of mutual support for ministry or personal growth, we will probably be content with a functional future. At the functional level of our existence we may become co-workers, co-ministers, co-inhabitants but we will not become co-authors of a vision for the future.

Placing ourselves together on the periphery

We can also position ourselves to discover the future by taking our place with those on the periphery of the empire, with those who are more powerless because of their distance from the centres of power. These are the people who know in their bones the disintegrating effects of the realities of a declining empire. These are the people whose future is most denied by the absence of a common social vision which would connect the threads of their lives with others. At the periphery of power, in places darkened by the shadow of the empire, religious are more likely to feel the need, the hunger and thirst for a different kind of future. Historically, new communities and new forms of religious life were founded on the periphery. And this remains true today—witness

the L'Arche communities for the mentally retarded and the Community of St. Egidio in Italy which serves the marginalized of the suburbs of Rome.

As long as we religious remain within the periphery of power, feeling neither very powerful nor totally powerless, we will continue to believe that we can cope. Liberals or conservatives, we will find a way to cope. We will keep on keeping on. We will not feel the acute need for a new meaning for religious life.

Loosening the bonds of liberalism

All of this said, I want to suggest that the future of religious life will not be discovered by abandoning the liberal model of religious life but by moving through it with greater consciousness and passion. I have suggested that this liberal model is disintegrating as surely as liberal capitalism is disintegrating in the West. Yet, it is just possible that this process of disintegration could become a creative and consciously chosen process which may give birth to new forms of religious life or encourage the rebirth of existing congregations. There is a world of difference between drifting into disintegration, sometimes destructively so, and consciously directing that process of disintegration.

What could this mean concretely? I answer this question very tentatively in the hope that this will encourage others to at least consider this question seriously. A further liberalization of religious life could mean encouraging an even more *radical pluralism* than that which has existed until now. There are probably many models of religious life within most liberal congregations. However, the differences among these models has been minimalized somewhat in the effort to sustain the minimal unity of a congregation. As a result, there has been neither the energy nor the encouragement for these models to develop as genuine alternatives for the future. There is chaos in many religious congregations but it is a calcified chaos.

A liberal congregation could, for example, encourage its members to form similar groups of those who are committed to similar apostolic projects (peoples or issues), to a particular form of community or to a type of spirituality. This radical pluralism would indeed jeopardize the already minimal unity in a liberal congregation and just about everyone's sense of belonging. However, it may just foster a deeper and more dynamically committed unity within the smaller groups. This sense of unity would not be

imposed from without (as conservatives are want to do) but freely chosen from within the group.

This more radical pluralism would breed its own form of chaos but it could be a meaningful chaos if it were chosen as a way of redirecting and re-energizing religious life for the sake of the kingdom. If the commitment to radical pluralism were sustained for a period of time, then there would indeed be some movement in liberal religious congregations, and some of that movement would be 'ahead'.

Through the process of radical pluralism, some groups may continue to be animated by the charism of the original congregation. They may even bring new life and meaning to that charism. However, other groups may find the original charism fading as they become more distanced from the congregation from which they emerged. These groups may discover a new charism which constitutes them as a distinct group. Those groups who do not discover any sense of charismatic purpose would probably soon disintegrate or develop a pattern of survival. In the dynamic I have suggested, the smaller groups emerging from within a liberal congregation could be initially related to that congregation through its tradition and charism. However, there would need to be some distance in order for this radical pluralism to develop into genuine alternatives for religious life in the future. What would provide that distance? This is surely a most difficult question. However, my tentative suggestion is that these various groups would need a measure of independence from the original congregation in the areas of government, finances and formation. There could be no radical pluralism if everyone continues to fall under the same model of government. There could be no genuine pluralism if groups do not have the responsibility of directing their finances according to their priorities. If this radical pluralism were allowed in the area of formation, it would locate formation in a more focussed way and would shift the process of incorporation from an emphasis on belonging to that of commitment.

I have emphasized the smaller size of these groups because I tend to agree with Michael Crosby that it is almost impossible for larger liberal congregations to reconstitute a dynamic sense of unity out of the wide diversity which has developed since Vatican II.[11] The maximum energy required for new beginnings cannot emerge from institutions in which manual commitments or vague visions have become the more normal basis for unity.

My own experience as a member of a small group which founded a newspaper leads me to stress the significance of a group, rather than an individual, in the process of such new beginnings. This experience has helped me to understand grace or charism as a power or energy which is actualized in the in-between of life: in-between persons and in-between persons and God. A charism is not a *thing* which is possessed by some and passed on to others. It is an energy, a dynamic, a power which cannot be contained or possessed. It becomes real and actual only when it is acted on, believed in and shared. To image grace or charism or power in interactional terms is also to acknowledge that there are certain requirements for its actualization. People must interact with God and each other and they must do so over a period of time. This kind of interaction is easier in a smaller group and more difficult in a larger group. Smaller groups are not necessarily weaker. Through dynamic interaction they may have the potential for great charismatic energy.

The question is whether more liberal congregations can do more than merely tolerate such new beginnings. This may depend partly on the extent to which a congregation has sounded out the depths of the possibilities and limitations of the liberal model. Perhaps more importantly, it will depend on that mysterious Spirit who means more than any model.

NOTES

[1] Sociologist Walter Russell Mead argues that the rise of the American empire coincides with the flourishing of liberalism from the groundwork laid by Roosevelt and Truman (1933–52). This liberal empire reached its peak, according to Mead, during the Kennedy-Johnson years. Mead describes the period after 1968 as the time of the 'decline of the liberal empire'. Cf Mead, *Mortal splendor: the American Empire in transition* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1987), p 34.

[2] Cf Peter Schmeisser, 'Is America in decline?', in *New York Times Magazine* (17 April 1988), pp 24–26, 66–68, 96.

[3] The leading writers of the school of decline are David P. Calleo of the John Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, Mancur Olson of the University of Maryland, Walter Russell Mead of *New Perspectives Quarterly* and most notably Yale historian Paul Kennedy, *The rise and fall of great powers* (New York: Random House, 1987).

[4] Obviously, my description of either of these options must necessarily remain sketchy—as neither conservativism nor liberalism exists as some ideal and unchanging type. Their particular character is modified by many regional and national differences and by the issues which shape various periods of history. The conservative tradition in Canada, for example, if quite different from the conservative tradition in the United States.

[5] Jim Wallis, 'A wolf in sheep's clothing', in *Sojourners* (20 May 1986), p 19.

[6] For a clear and concise presentation of the liberal model see Joe Holland and Peter Henriot S. J. *Social analysis: linking faith and justice* (Washington, D.C.: Center of Concern, 1980) especially pp 14–15.

[7] Victor Frankl, *The will to meaning* (New York: New American Library, 1969), p 35.

[8] Cf Joe Holland, 'The spiritual crisis of modern culture', (Washington, D.C.: Center of Concern Monograph, address to Network Seminar, summer 1983), p 47. Holland writes that if the crisis of the third world is economic and the crisis of the second world is political, then the crisis of the first world is cultural, 'Every culture is in essence a spiritual (or anti-spiritual) vision of reality. So we might say that if the deepest crisis of industrial capitalism is cultural, we find a spiritual crisis at its core.'

[9] Michael Crosby O.F.M. Cap., 'Transforming religious life', (Canadian Religious Conference set of 10 audiocassettes, Conferences given to 1988 National Association of Formation Directors).

[10] Cf my forthcoming book *Reweaving religious life: towards a post-liberal model of religious life* especially Chapters 3 and 4. Here I also mention the importance of 'Being together on pilgrimage' as a way of discovering the signs of the Spirit in our time.

[11] Cf Michael Crosby O.F.M. Cap., 'Transforming religious life.'