

TO COPE OR TO CREATE

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‘**W**E ARE NOT all going to die, but we shall all be changed’ (1 Cor 15,51). ‘The world as we know it is passing away’ (1 Cor 7,31). Paul was expecting the Parousia in his own lifetime. Today’s religious, and I speak in particular of those who consider their call as primarily apostolic, have seen such changes in their way of life since the mid-sixties that many feel the end time is upon them. Are they in fact witnessing the passing away of the world as they know it, of an institute which has served its purpose? Or are they being challenged to rekindle their ancient fires and blaze into new life? The answer, I believe, lies with religious themselves. It depends on three things: how they feel about the life they are living now, what they are willing to do to make it viable for younger members and whether they think they have something to offer in the Church which is uniquely theirs as religious.

My article will touch on each of these three clauses, but I will focus particularly on the current disproportion between older and younger members within religious institutes and its consequences. I would like to place the whole against a larger backdrop which cannot be ignored as a sign of the times. For the past two years I, an American religious, have been studying theology alongside a number of lay women and men, most of them young, some of them recently married. They skimp and scrape, work part-time and summers, find space for volunteer service and realistically anticipate an indefinite future of uncertain prospects as lay ministers in the Church. If one multiplies their number by the number of Catholic divinity schools in my country and then adds those Catholic lay people who make up half the student population at Harvard, Yale, Chicago and other divinity schools, one is alerted to the phenomenon of a growing body of committed and professionally trained lay ministers many of whom thirty years ago would have found their way into religious life. I invite the reader to keep in mind the significance of this ‘sign’ as the article progresses.

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Simple facts about being old

First, let us consider some simple facts about being old. No gerontologist is needed to tell us that physical energy wanes and with it the impulse to be up and doing. Minor ailments begin to accumulate and add up negatively either to frustration of activity or to passivity and withdrawal. The elderly are house-bound, always there. They need help getting out and around and depend on the able-bodied to accompany them. Loss of independence is difficult and calls for affective support. Because the recent memory of the elderly is often impaired, the past becomes more and more real to them, even as it is idealized. Indeed, the protagonists of bygone days are of such stature that their like will never again be seen. This tendency of the old to look back rather than around them for a sense of connection and belonging makes their present seem like a postscript to life. Only in poetry is old age experienced as the 'best' and 'the last of life for which the first was made'. The fact is that fewer and fewer people will ever have been to that foreign country of the old which is their youth. The 'golden years' therefore will mask a private loneliness, a sense of isolation which no amount of cheerful talk can alleviate.

Strangely, in religious life the old are not very good company for each other. Their enforced leisure does not often lead to intimacy or the discovery of new possibilities for friendships. Many are generous in performing small services for each other, but few are able to offer the service of listening to a contemporary. Nor has their early formation encouraged self-disclosure. The old do not want to be a bother or a burden to younger members. Because they are keenly aware that their stories are unfamiliar, their values 'quaint' in the ears of their juniors, they fear patronage or polite dismissal and fall silent about themselves. What the old have learned of God has been mediated by people no longer alive and by structures and practices no longer in vogue. New structures and ways seem to block their familiar routes of access to God; they evoke no memories or holy associations; they do not nourish the soul.

Encyclopaedic resources of wisdom and experience are sealed up behind the faces of the old. The colourful pages of their adventures and accomplishments are bound in a closed book. The wonderful stories of what God's grace has enabled them to do and to be are not heard with awe. So the old, even in the best of communities, are often alone with God, with their memories and with needs

which no one can meet. They have no children or grandchildren to contemplate as the bearers into the future of the torch of their own life's sparking; nor is it easy for them to identify with what looks like a tearing down rather than a building up of their institute by those whose day in the sun it happens to be. The most apparent but least mentioned fact about the old is that they live in the shadow of death. Everyone is in on the secret that their years, perhaps days, are numbered. They are a constant reminder of mortality and of eternity around the corner.

This cartoon sketch must be taken for what it is, an amalgam of features drawn from a number of cases. Applied to the chronically or terminally ill, it is compounded; applied to the active old, it is considerably mitigated.

The old and the young

Obviously my topic is fraught with the danger of misunderstanding. To name the diminishment of an increasing number of elderly religious by way of introducing the predicament of younger religious seems to imply that certain people have outlived their welcome. To call attention to the disproportion of the top to the bottom half of the age ladder and to the divergence of needs and priorities between them is to risk suspicion of the latest 'ism', ageism. But I make no 'modest proposal' that the old and infirm should throw themselves on the mercy of state institutions to enable the rest to get on with their real work. On the contrary, it belongs to the mission of religious to give prophetic witness to counter-cultural attitudes toward their aging members. Precisely because they insist on defending the dignity of the old and celebrating their time of life, religious must confront the consequences of their values.

Clearly it is the diminishment, not the blessings, of being old in religious life which are the factors which must enter full strength into the calculus of men and women who today would join a typical apostolic congregation in Europe or North America. Now, because the elderly, the old and the infirm significantly outnumber the younger members, these elders give the appearance of being the standard or the norm. One has only to observe the grey of the heads one counts in any gathering of religious to realize what image is being projected to the world. Without their ever wanting to impose a way of life on younger members, they do just that. The sheer force of their numbers in relation to the rest of the membership creates a new situation in which the covenant for

mission is of necessity skewed to the maintenance and care of the aging. Financial resources, already diminished through attrition and a falling-off of vocations, are increasingly taxed by retirement and health care or by allocation to these needs of personnel who would otherwise be earning a salary.

The ethos of the institute is also affected. The non-verbal and mostly unconscious expectations of the majority become a critical mass which cannot easily be outweighed by the minority without a difficult and sometimes painful assertion of alternatives.

Then and now

Consider the situation of a young man or woman entering an institute in the days of its foundation. There would be others, friends and contemporaries probably, who shared a dream and whose gifts would all go into its realization. There would be no tradition to fit into, no blueprint to follow, only the call of Christ echoing in the gospels and ringing through in the world to go and give one's life for others in their need. Inexperience would be offset by apostolic vitality. Blueprints would come later.

Next, consider a young woman entering an apostolic community in the halcyon days of the nineteen-fifties. Now although there are many maps and guidebooks, she is surrounded by a group of companions near her own age. When she leaves the novitiate and joins a community, she will be taught, inspired, inculturated by a number of elderly, old and infirm sisters, but the character of the group will be determined by the active and younger majority. The atmosphere will be charged with energy, challenge, purpose, liveliness, fun and creativity. There may be a weight of dead tradition against which to pull, but action has a chance of overcoming the forces of reaction without attacking the core of the tradition.

Finally, consider the case of a young woman who joins the same community today. Structures and practices will have undergone a sea change in the tempests of the sixties and seventies. In the relative calm of the eighties, there will be within the broader congregation she has joined a diversity of ministries, a few corporate works with larger communities attached to them, a number of smaller communities, a few religious living with members of other congregations by reason of their work, a few living alone for a variety of reasons; perhaps there is a motherhouse community; probably there is a separate infirmary with its own staff community. After a novitiate spent in the company of several contemporaries

following a programme individually designed to meet her particular formation needs, this woman is sent to a community which has been carefully chosen because of its potential for fostering her growth. Between herself and the next youngest member, however, there may be a gap of ten to fifteen years. She may find herself in a part of the country where there are no others who have had the same formation experience she has had. Let us speculate about her fortunes in religious life.

The case of Kate

Kate, let us call her, has finished her novitiate. She comes to the community with her eyes open. She has been around long enough to know that contemporaries in the congregation are thin on the ground but she has bargained for this. Because the grace of her vocation is strong she relies on it to compensate for what may be lacking in peer friendship and human support. Still in her twenties, she joins a group of eight whose ages range from thirty-eight to seventy-nine. Five are over fifty. As time goes by, Kate discovers that it is not so much companions of her own age she misses—these she has found in her apostolate—but people with whom to share values and her belief that community is a witness to a gospel way of life. She had dreamed of participating in the making of community, but everyone seems content with the way things are. Much as she likes television, she is a little surprised that it determines the time of prayer, and that the prayer neither helps her feel in touch with God nor with the community. This is because the group could never agree on a form of prayer which met the needs of all, so it settled for the Liturgy of the Hours recited in a sing-song way without variation. On most days a good half, the younger half, of the community is missing.

Kate had had a taste of working and living on her own before she entered, but she had recognized a call to go beyond autonomy and independence. One of the things which had drawn her to religion was the prospect of building community around the gospel value of justice with compassion. She had read the chapter documents of the congregation she was considering and they expressed her hopes exactly. So, in the spirit of leaving all things to be with the poor Christ in his people, she had given up her credit cards, her apartment and her car. In the novitiate, she had been confirmed in the belief that her desires fitted the charism of the congregation she was joining. She had made them the subject of her prayer and

study and had shared them with the other novices during reflection sessions with them. Her convictions about a corporate life-style based on solidarity with the poor had been deepened through the experience of a thirty-day retreat. She had made her vows in a spirit of generosity and readiness for real hardship.

Kate now finds that her community is far from being of one mind about the current direction of the institute. Some groan when material on the subject of justice arrives from the provincial office. On weekends when she has time for some deeper conversations about life and ministry and spirituality, she discovers that the people closest to her in age have cleared out. Many of them had entered straight from secondary school, had never tasted independence and now they were making up for it. She feels out of step with them, so she turns to the elders whom she loves and admires but whose expectations wear her out. She goes out of her way to meet their needs, and she is really interested in hearing from them about the past, but she cannot imagine what it was like, having had a totally different formation from theirs. She picks up from some of them a note of disapproval when she speaks about her own novitiate. Religious life is so easy these days, they seem to be saying. Yet to judge from how often she is called on to chauffeur them about, these elders are certainly taking advantage of their freedom, she thinks.

Kate and the community

From their side, members of the community are concerned about Kate. She is more and more out with lay friends or in her room listening to the kind of music she inflicted on the community during a prayer service she once arranged. They want very much to be a help to her but they also hope she will grow out of some of her immature needs for group closeness. After all, they say, we are an apostolic community, not a nest. Some of the middle group are disappointed that Kate is not more militant toward the Church's oppression of women and its authoritarian attitudes toward sexuality and academic freedom. Kate simply goes her merry way claiming that *she* is the Church and that it is up to her and others along with her to make it what it is meant to be. Some of the elders find this arrogant and lacking in respect.

At the end of her first year in the community, Kate is discouraged and disillusioned. The women with whom she lives are not able to forget that she is the age of their nieces and great-nieces. Their

patronizing attitudes tend to trivialize her adulthood. This makes her angry and she regresses to the very age at which they place her. She is aware that many of her lay contemporaries are married and already bringing up a family. In charge in their own homes they are treated by society as responsible adults. Yet she has grown to like and appreciate the sisters she lives with. She recognizes their goodness even though she is not able to communicate with them as a community or make her dream understood. Her single voice is not strong enough to influence the life of the group. She is, in effect, disenfranchized by the weight of the majority who never for a moment think of themselves as oppressors. Something must be done for Kate, for the future of the institute, but what?

Superiors might try moving Kate to a new community, a smaller one where she could make her contribution felt, but she would have to withdraw from an apostolate to which she is suited and where her contribution is proving significant. Another approach might be to ask her present community to work with a facilitator who would help the sisters hear Kate and hear themselves. Or superiors might transfer several of the more difficult sisters to another house, or bring in a new local superior more able to offset the imbalance in the house. These solutions could prove very unwelcome to the majority. A more radical solution might be found in proposing to the province the establishment of a small neighbourhood community in a poor area of the city and asking for volunteers to join the experiment. Kate would be included as a founding member. She would commute to her present apostolate even though that would mean coming and going in a high-risk area. The financial aspect of all these alternatives would have to be taken into consideration; some might prove financially prohibitive.

The possibility of survival

At this point I would like to recall the 'how', 'what', and 'whether' of the first paragraph. A religious institute's survival, I ventured, depends on three things, the first of which was how religious themselves feel about the life they are living now. If there is complacency about the present disproportion of old to young; if an aura of inevitability prevails; if nothing is done to make local communities habitable and properly challenging places for newer members; if individuals are not willing to be disturbed, uprooted, redirected; if members value their personal agenda over that of the congregation; if no capital is risked in new ventures; if all the

creative energies of an institute are being poured into maintenance, religious life as we know it will surely pass away—and probably should.

In the second place I suggested that survival depended on what religious were willing to do to make their life viable for younger members. For a moment, however, I will digress to call to mind the Second Week of the *Spiritual Exercises* of St Ignatius, the week of election. This is the crisis point for a retreatant deciding on a state in life. His or her whole future hangs in the balance. Ignatius prepares a person for this moment with the utmost care, inviting her to contemplate the mysteries of Christ sent for the world's salvation, to identify with him in his mission as fully as possible. Then he brings out of his repertoire three powerful exercises—the Two Standards, the Three Classes of People and the Three Degrees of Humility (or Love). In a nutshell, the message is this: a person who is called to a foolish love for Christ stops at nothing to express this love with his whole life and therefore he chooses the means most perfectly suited to his purpose. The logic of this foolish love is inescapable. I submit that religious congregations are at the present moment in the Second Week of the Exercises. There is an election to be made, and their whole future hangs in the balance.

Presuming that the love of Christ is the inner dynamic of religious institutes (*caritas Christi urget nos*), and that his mission is paramount, what are congregations willing to do to choose life? The consideration of the Three Classes of People suggests that some will talk about the problem *ad infinitum*, or lament it, or ignore it, or pretend it will get better, yet do nothing; some will fly into action (perhaps they rearrange the deck chairs on the Titanic as it is sinking) and persuade themselves that the perspiration they work up is the solution, that it will save the ship; a few, having identified the target, will aim their shot precisely there and hit it. If religious congregations want to survive they will have to take some radical measures to allow younger members to express the life force that is within them.

Creative ways of meeting the present problem

Earlier in this article I described the situation of someone coming into religious life in the days of a congregation's foundation, then in the mid-fifties and finally today. It might be useful to think of these three moments as indicative of possible ways of proceeding to meet the present problem. For a congregation to allow the

present situation to continue would be equivalent to its signing its own death warrant. But there are creative ways to combine the best features of the mid-fifties with the élan of the era of the first founding. Three things would be necessary: youth in sufficient strength to create a 'critical mass', several well-chosen older people who were able to enter into an experiment with adventuresome zeal, and a need crying out to be met. If there were only two or three people in formation, they might be sent together to a new mission. They would not necessarily have to share a corporate apostolate, but it would be crucial for them to live and act as an apostolic team bringing the spirit of their institute and a single vision to bear on whatever work they undertook. Their life together might well come to take on the features of the Basic Ecclesial Communities of Latin America. The growth factor would be built in as other young people were attracted to their way of life, spent time with them and asked to join them, some through a temporary commitment, some through a permanent one.

I offer this model as a sample only. Other creative alternatives will suggest themselves. But what is urgently needed is a new beginning on the original foundation. The cycle of an institute's existence must either come full circle and collapse into itself or find a new trajectory and take off again. On the first day of every institute's existence there would have been a few young men or women, friends and companions in grace, to carry forward the founding impulse. Now, if there is to be another beginning, a few young women or men will be needed again. They must be formed for their role and encouraged to think of themselves as companions and co-founders with the original founder. Entrusted with a corporate grace, given scope to meet courageously the challenges of their situation—and to make the mistakes of their inexperience—they will become the seed of their institute's regeneration.

At the time, signs of new life will invigorate the old, give them hope for their institute's future, a focus for their prayers and a special interest in the new generation. Despite their physical limitations, many elderly religious remain vitally involved in ministry and in the life of the congregation, bringing only serenity and blessing to those around and giving magnificent testimony to faith, hope and love. Given the fact that the old and the infirm are a kind of corporate treasure, a 'national trust' and a resource to which the whole institute needs access if it is to perpetuate its tradition, newcomers who have the good fortune to meet and spend

time with them will be immeasurably enriched. But these new members who are the new life God gives a congregation must be dispensed from community responsibilities toward the old so that one set of diminishments does not create another in a situation of co-dependence. The tip of the branch, the growth point, to invoke the image of the tree, must be released from its unnatural responsibility to nourish the trunk and freed to seek the light that will produce leaf blossom and fruit and extend the tree's outreach into the sky.

The third clause of my first paragraph lays a last condition for the survival of apostolic institutes as we know them: the conviction that religious have an irreplaceable role in the Church. There is nothing religious do by way of ministry which lay people are not doing with the same degree of commitment and professional competence. Religious life today is one avenue of service in the Church among many. We must admit that awareness of the universal call to holiness and the rediscovery of baptismal 'ordination' to the priesthood and the ministry of the faithful have radically changed the *Sitz im Leben* of religious life. That is why in this article I have not dwelt upon ministry as if it were unique to religious. Congregations are going to have to redefine for themselves their reason for being or they will find themselves in competition with the laity they have so successfully formed. Who but the young, who are still called to religious life as the place where their vocation will find greatest resonance, are more able to tell religious who they are today and in what their specificity lies? Survival will depend on drawing out the full potential of that uniqueness for the sake of the Church and the world.

'We are not all going to die, but we shall all be changed' (1 Cor 15,51). As apostolic religious we are all *being* changed; whether we all die depends on us. 'The world as we know it is passing away' (1 Cor 7,31). But the Parousia expected so imminently by Paul tarried. He did not realize that it would be a succession of passings away of forms and institutions over a long historical span. Is religious life to be relic of the past or portent of the future? If God knows, God is letting us decide.