

FORMATION IN A POST-MODERN CONTEXT

By MARY JO LEDDY

EVENTS KEPT INTERFERING WITH the process of writing this article:

- * There happened to be a war in the Gulf.
- * I happened to hear that there will be less than a handful of female novices in all of Canada next year.
- * More refugees happened to arrive on our doorstep.

Were these interruptions or invitations? It seemed important to reflect on the significance of the war in the Gulf in writing about the social context of formation. Yet it was difficult to do so as events continued to unfold daily before us. It seemed pointless to write about formation as if there was no doubt about the future of some religious congregations. But the big black eyes of the Eritrean children who peered over my typewriter kept reminding me of the point of it all. The eyes of the child God.

In recent years, I have been reluctant to focus too directly on questions of formation because such a preoccupation can become a way for religious to avoid the question of the future of religious life. Thus, a congregation which is unwilling or unable to focus on the question of its future meaning and purpose may spend a great deal of energy trying to answer specific questions about the formation of new members. Something similar often happens in the Church or in society. If there is a problem in the Church (for instance sexual abuse) the solution becomes the stricter screening of prospective seminarians. If there is a problem in society (for instance racism), then the solution becomes a change in the school curriculum.

Having served as a resource person for the National Association of Formation Directors in Canada for two years, I have become acutely aware of how members of formation teams are bearing the question of the future of religious life, often with great faith and courage, but they lack the authority to resolve that question without the commitment of the larger congregation. Very often they feel they are being asked to compensate for a congregation's fear about the future.

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In writing this article, I have no desire to add to the burden of the future already being placed on formation programmes. I do, however, want to explore the challenge that our socio-cultural context poses for all of us who want to be part of forming religious life for the future. Let us be clear: each of us has a choice of being part of that process of formation or not. This is not to say that the questions posed by the reality of new members are irrelevant. Sometimes they challenge a congregation (or at least some of the members) to consider the reality of its own future. Sometimes they invite us to be part of the process of forming the future of religious life.

Within the limits of this essay I want to reflect first on the post-modern context of religious life and then to discuss one particular shape of the crisis of meaning in the post-modern world. Finally, I want to consider the basis of meaning in religious life for the future.

The post-modern world

Sounding out the depths of the present has always been essential in the process of grounding religious life for the future. Such a sounding out is essentially an activity of faith. It has to do with discovering what resonates with the gospel and in identifying the dissonant chords which threaten to obscure the song of hope which religious life offers to the Church and to the world.

From where I sit, on a little plot of earth in a very western, very first-world culture, there seems so little which grounds the essentially gracious form of life which religious life is meant to be. A parched earth. A materialistic culture which has repressed the desires of the spirit every bit as much as the previous century repressed sexual desires. And yet it is this part of the world which so longs for those sprouts of the spirit to spring up and grow within it.

Elsewhere I have written about this context as one shaped by the reality of the decline of the North American empire.¹ It is an empire which has been politically shaped by the values of liberalism and economically driven by the dynamic of capitalism. It is not a healthy place for religious to be—at least uncritically. It is, nevertheless, the place where many of us are called to be. (It is a rare country in this world that remains outside the influence of the North American empire.) Yet, it is worth noting that something far deeper and broader than the North American empire is declining in this context. What is disintegrating is what has been called the vision of modernity, or the modern world.

It is the modern world which we as religious were so ready and willing to enter at the time of Vatican II. It was a world shaped by the

Enlightenment, by a confidence in the human capacity to know the world through science and to shape it through technology. It was a powerful secular vision which exalted know-how and can-do and which promised liberation from the determinism of nature and the strictures of tradition. It celebrated spirit—the spirit of human inquiry and inventiveness. It promised progress. This modern vision was so powerful that the Church (and religious) spent about 200 years resisting its power, its promise and fascination. Yet, even as it was resisting this modern vision, the Church was subtly acknowledging its power.

At the time of Vatican II, the Church (and religious life) made an option to affirm what was positive in the modern world. All the various forms of resistance that had defined religious life (a different way of living, of acting, of being) were modified to make it more relevant to the modern world. Perhaps it was, as many said, the sign of a Church which had come of age. Perhaps it was a sign that we were no longer afraid of the modern vision of the world. Was this a sign that we were sure of our own faith or was it indicative of some intuitive recognition that the modern dream was losing its power? In any case, even if we were no longer so afraid of the modern world, we were still fascinated by it.

And now. And now. There are significant voices within the secular world and even within the Church which are recognizing that we are entering a post-modern world. Understanding this shift in world views has everything to do with the future of religious life.

The term 'post-modern' has been defined variously within different disciplines by diverse writers and thinkers. The meaning of post-modernism within literary criticism, for example, is different from but related to the way in which it is used in historical or philosophical discussions about the contemporary context. It should also be noted that the critique of modernity is not new nor has it been confined to the Church. It is possible, for example, to read British writers as diverse as Wordsworth, Dickens, Thomas Hardy and D. H. Lawrence as being among the early critics of the myths of modernity. In the United States, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Thoreau (New England Transcendentalists) would be early examples of thinkers and writers who sensed the intrinsic limits of the myths of modernity.²

My own view is that the vision of modernity was definitively shattered not by thinkers but by the events of twentieth-century history. Auschwitz. Hiroshima. These two events have become

challenges we are still grappling with. If this is what technology can do, can we believe in it? Can we still believe in progress in the face of such barbarism?

As the twentieth century unfolds even further, many more people are beginning to fear the effects of technology. Environmentalists have signalled the destruction to the biosphere which has resulted from the unfettered use of technology. Feminists are questioning the mode of domination which has developed along with the modern vision. And perhaps more significantly, there are those who are questioning the vision of progress—the belief that tomorrow will always be better than today. A younger generation no longer believes that it will have a better life than that of its parents. The twin mythologies of mastery and progress, integral to the modern vision, are somewhat in doubt.

I say 'somewhat' because we have just witnessed, in blips and blurbs, the war in the Gulf which seemed to be a massive victory for technology and mastery. For those who have claimed that the modern secular vision is dead, there must at least be a pause for reflection. However, there is every reason to say that the war in the Gulf has been indicative of a western world which no longer believes in a creative and positive vision and which can only affirm itself through the creation and defeat of an 'enemy'. How many more wars will be generated to shore up our conviction that we can and must master the world through technology? As the myth of progress is challenged, the myth of mastery through technology becomes the only remaining way of asserting cultural predominance. As modern nations, once shaped by an overarching vision, now begin to disintegrate into collections of competing self-interests, war becomes a political necessity. As Stanley Hauerwas has put it: 'We are literally a people that morally live off our wars because they give us the necessary basis for self-sacrifice so that a people who have been taught to pursue only their own interest can at times be mobilized to die for one another'.³ How many more wars will be 'necessary' to provide citizens of the west with some reason to go beyond their personal and economic self-interest?

The crisis of meaning in the post-modern world

The war in the Gulf was indicative of the extent to which the modern vision can maintain itself only through the most coercive use of force. The creative power of modernity has exhausted itself. We are now realizing, or should realize, that the great overarching vision

of modernity, which was shattered in Auschwitz and Hiroshima, is now manifesting itself in the daily existence of the western world. The fragmentation of existence reflects the fragmentation of meaning in the western world. Within the secular world, there is no longer one large overarching vision of the world. What we are left with are fragmentary and often colliding insights, isolated achievements and the singular moments of glory or generosity. Within the Church we find ourselves similarly fragmented. Only few would pretend that Catholics are guided by a single and integrated vision of life and the world. We are sustained by fragments of a tradition, beautiful fragments, true fragments. But there is no whole greater than all these parts. Most Catholics return to mass on Christmas Eve and rejoice in the sense of mystery which is communicated through the sacraments. But they no longer sense the whole world as breathing with some mysterious significance. The day after Christmas, McDonald's is McDonald's. A hamburger is a hamburger and the more the better. Religion is for certain times and places, here and there, more or less and always in moderation.⁴

And the Church, which had for so long identified itself as the bastion of resistance against a powerful modern vision, now finds itself wildly oscillating between a conservative resistance to a modern vision and a more liberal approach which affirms that modern vision—a vision which is persisting in a merely fragmentary way.

The very word 'post-modernism' is revealing. It is a word defined by the past. It is not a word defined by a vision of the future. And thus we as religious are caught in a conflict between a pre-modern and a modern Church. In some way, these two phases in the life of the Church can and should be part of our identity as Catholics. However, our vocation as religious depends on our being able to locate ourselves in the struggles and the promise of the post-modern world.

Meaning what we say: the new mission to a post-modern world

Religious have always actualized their deepest charism in historical contexts which were transitional, confused, fragmentary. Within these contexts, religious congregations were founded with a particular sense of meaning, a particular sense of meaning which was at once universal. My own sense is that questions about formation (which are also questions about the future of religious life) are intrinsically linked to the question of meaning in the Church and in the culture. If religious congregations are not groups constituted by meaning they soon become collectivities sustained by self-interest.⁵

Given the limits of this essay, I want to examine one particular way in which the crisis of meaning in the post-modern world manifests itself. My intuition is that entering into this crisis (and other manifestations of it) with our hearts and heads will awaken in some religious and in some Christians a new sense of mission in this time and in this place.

It is not that the post-modern world is totally lacking in meaning. It would be more appropriate to say that the fragmentation of meaning is often experienced as merely episodic meaning in the post-modern world. Meaning is something which happens intermittently. Our lives are starting to resemble a television series. Episode by episode the series 'grabs' its viewers. We are familiar with the characters and the situation within which they play their lives out. Yet, the series is so constructed that we can tune into only one episode and find it meaningful, we can miss many episodes and still find it possible to follow the drama. There is no underlying narrative to the television series just as there is no underlying narrative to give meaning to the history of the post-modern world or to the message of the Church. So people tune in and tune out.

Such a situation is ripe for propaganda—as we saw during the war in the Gulf. This war was an episode. It had very little connection with any historical reality which preceded it. The country of Iraq which had only recently been considered an ally in the American war against Iran was now classified as an enemy. It had very little relationship to what was to follow. It is now becoming apparent how little thought was given to the overall geopolitical implications of the war against Iraq. But who realizes this? Propaganda means that anything repeated often enough becomes true. We were fed a line in the war and we were hooked. When war becomes an episode, morally consequential thinking and feeling becomes more difficult. And what is true politically is also true personally. How many people are unable to treat their lives consequentially?

A culture which lives on episodic meanings is one in which it becomes ever more difficult to lead consequential lives. It is a culture in which it becomes an increasing challenge to speak about a God who is a God of history, about a biblical narrative of sin and grace, about the person of Jesus who has become part of human history and transformed it forever. What seems less and less possible becomes more and more necessary. Can we religious discover and create a sense of meaning in this post-modern world? Not unless we first recognize the episodic quality of our own lives.

The experience of episodic meaning, so prevalent in western countries which are inundated by the media, has shaped our spirits as religious far more than we know. How many of us have had 'meaningful experiences'—for a time—a meaningful retreat, a meaningful experience among the poor, a meaningful community experience, a meaningful relationship. These experiences are like chapters in search of a book. What we lack in our lives is a narrative structure which holds together all the various episodes of our lives. For many religious, the only constant throughout all the episodes of life is the self—not the deep and true self which is described by people such as Thomas Merton and Carl Jung, but the self-conscious construct of the ego.

In the past, that underlying narrative structure was supplied by the Church or by the nation. What we are left with now are pieces of stories and it seems almost entirely dependent on either psychological preference or political power which of those pieces will become 'relevant' at any particular time. The consequences of this are all too obvious. We see 'single issue' Catholics, 'single issue' politicians. We are becoming a Church that is a collection of stories, a collection of issues—but not yet a Church with a story to preach.

For those of us who desire to commit the whole of our lives for all of our lives, this is a serious situation. We will not be happy committing ourselves episodically, totally at times and partially at others. We will be quite miserable if we commit parts of our lives totally and leave other parts open for negotiation. We know this kind of low level misery in ourselves and in others:

* the sister who is totally committed to teaching or to justice but who believes prayer is negotiable.

* the brother who is totally committed to prayer during a sabbatical but who abandons it once work begins.

* the priest who is totally committed to community as a priority one evening and then operates as a lone ranger the rest of the week.

* the novice who has a great experience working with the poor and who then enrolls in a massage course for another meaningful experience.

Unfortunately, one could go on.

In describing these examples of lives lived in episodes of meaning, I do not want to make moral judgements. What I am attempting to describe is not the weakness of individuals but the weakness of a culture, of a church culture, of a whole way of life.

Once we begin to unpack the various implications of living in a post-modern context, our questions deepen. Having seen the dark

side of the modern attempt to manufacture some meaning in our lives, we should be reticent about making up some kind of meaning for religious life at this time.

However, this at least can be said: We as religious will discover the meaning of our vocation if we begin to be challenged by the mission to the post-modern world. And we must believe that if we hear this challenge, then we have already been given the grace of responding to this challenge. This is the essential spiritual insight that is lacking in some of the current writings about the future of religious life. If we see the problems of our present situation, then this is already a grace and it means that God has already given us the inner strength to respond to this situation.

We can also affirm, in faith, that as Christians our meaning is ultimately based on a meaningful relationship with the person of Jesus. I recall a conversation with a friend of mine, a married woman with a new son. She is very busy, as is her husband. They get up, get the child ready for day-care, go to work, come home, make supper, get the child ready for bed, prepare for work the next day. 'Sometimes I just feel my life is just a collection of pieces', she said. The conversation would have been usual enough except for the fact that she went on to say: 'But what I love to do, later in the evening before I go to bed, is to go into my son's room and just look at him. I just love looking at him. And then all the fatigue falls away and I know the point of it all.'

The point of it all is a person. For us as Christians, this is always true. The point of it all is a Person not a project, not success . . . not progress. The point of religious life is not our work, not our prayer, not our community. The point of our lives is the person of Jesus Christ who is the meaning in what we do, pray and live.

Needless to say, spiritually wise ones have always warned us that such talk about the person of Jesus risked becoming an abstraction, a creation of our imagination. How do we know we are following the real Jesus and not the idea of Christ? Baron von Hügel had some words of advice in this regard. He suggested that we could be more sure that we were following the real Jesus if we were involved in the service of the poor and if we were attending the Eucharist. Both actions involved a kind of corporality, a kind of corporateness, which helps to ensure that our relationship with the person of Jesus is indeed meaningful.

Of course, the service of the poor and even the celebration of the Eucharist has become far more problematic for us than it was in the

days of Baron von Hügel. We are more aware of the various ideologies that can be present in both activities. Service of the poor and the celebration of the Eucharist do not automatically make sense in a Church in a post-modern world. Nevertheless, there is a wisdom in von Hügel's advice that we would do well to take to heart.

Over the past two years I have made speaking with and to younger people a priority. They are not like the young people I hear talked about in religious formation circles. They are not wildly dysfunctional. They are not self-preoccupied or complacent. Those I have talked to are energetic, generous, in search of ways in which to channel their desire for commitment. They tell me that when they look at the Church they are not inspired.

'Why?' I asked.

'Because it doesn't mean what it says.'

As the conversation unfolded, a young man talked at length about the gap between the challenging and powerful statements made from the pulpit and in church documents. The problem was that there was very little evidence that what was said was being lived. Thus his sense that the Church lacked meaning. I have frequently reflected on this conversation. What young people say about the Church they also say about religious life. In the end, a crisis of meaning, such as that which exists within religious life, will only be solved by a profound conversion of life. Meaning makes sense when we live it. Our commitments say, to ourselves and others, 'I mean it.' 'We mean it.'

Perhaps the key question that all of us involved in forming the future of religious life must ask is: How must we live and act in order to mean what we say? There is no easier way, no other way. Philosophers and theologians can and should engage in discussions about the meaning of meaning. But for those of us who seek to be followers of Jesus in a post-modern world we must, like him, mean what we say with our lives.

NOTES

¹ Cf my *Reweaving religious life: beyond the liberal model* (Mystic, Conn.: Twenty-Third Publications, 1990) and my *Say to the darkness: we beg to differ* (Toronto: Lester & Orpen Dennys, 1990).

² For a fine survey of the intellectual critics and proponents of the idea of progress see Christopher Lasch, *The true and only heaven: progress and its critics* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1991).

³ Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *Resident aliens* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), p 35.

⁴ For an excellent sociological study of the fragmentation of meaning in mainline religions see Reginald Bibby, *Fragmented gods: the poverty and potential of religion in Canada* (Toronto: Collins, 1989).

⁵ There is a fine sociological presentation of the implications of the associational model for the future of religious life in Patricia Wittberg S.C., *Creating a future for religious life* (New York/Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1991). What she refers to as the associational model I have described as the liberal model of religious life.

Erratum: *Way Supplement 70 (Spring, 1991) p 50. Footnote 8 should read ' . . . founded by P. Huby S.J. and Catherine de Francheville in 1674'.*