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ACRES WE ARE TO BE GATHERED FOR GOD: VOWED WOMEN RELIGIOUS AND ENGAGING IMPASSE AS A WAY FORWARD FOR THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

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ACRES WE ARE TO BE GATHERED FOR GOD:
VOWED WOMEN RELIGIOUS AND ENGAGING IMPASSE AS A WAY
FORWARD FOR THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

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By
Amy Katherine McKenna
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“Acres we are to be gathered for God.” In Jessica Powers’ poem, “This is a Beautiful Time,” a woman shares her vision of a life lived in the “age of the Holy Spirit,” a time marked by “new heights “ and “new depths.”¹ This age has been visibly alive and active among the many communities of women religious since they heard the call for renewal in the documents of the Second Vatican Council. As with any period of intense growth, there have been moments of learning marked by pain and loss, but also great joy and deeper faith. This growth has led to a new understanding of what it means to be a mature woman of faith living a vowed religious life.

This maturity has often come with tension and misunderstanding. Many in the hierarchy of the Catholic Church view this renewal with suspicion and fear. Cardinal Rodé, the former prefect for the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, illustrated this well when he addressed the renewal. He claimed the church needed to “oppose reformers” who “proclaim themselves to be prophets, but show their true colors by their lack of humility, their impatience, and their disregard for the Sacred Scripture and tradition.”²

The reformers Cardinal Rodé spoke about were the communities of religious women who belonged to the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR). They saw renewal differently. Nancy Sylvester, former LCWR president, shared this vision when she stated, “I see that we, women religious, in fidelity to the prompting of the Spirit initially revealed through the official Church, have given expression to a form of

¹ Jessica Powers, *The Selected Poetry of Jessica Powers*, eds. Regina Siegfried, ACS and Robert F. Morneau (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1999) 27

² Cardinal Franc Rodé, “Reforming Religious Life With The Right Hermeneutic.” Web. www.zenit.org . October 13, 2014

religious life situated in, critical of, and expressive of the culture and values of the United States.”³

These two opposing ways of envisioning church, tradition, mission and authority have come to light and culminated in a doctrinal investigation of the LCWR by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, and an Apostolic Visitation of all apostolic communities in the United States, mandated by the Congregation for Consecrated Life. Through the lens of this impasse, the following explores the process of renewal for these religious women: a renewal that goes far beyond the politics of power and illustrates a discovery of a much deeper dimension of a spirituality born of experience, contemplation, and growth in spiritual freedom. This mature faith, garnered by engagement with the world, a deep love of Jesus and his Gospel message, and a clearer understanding of what it means to be a vowed religious woman, brings to light the depth of spiritual renewal since Vatican II.

From this stance, we will consider the metamorphosis of religious communities toward a renewed focus on their founding principles of mission and prophetic purpose through a return to a deeper understanding and practice of vows, community, discernment, and mature faith. This renewal remains focused on a radical commitment toward the fulfillment of a baptismal call to follow Jesus, one that is shared by all people of God. As a result of this transformation brought to light by the recent Vatican investigations, I suggest that the model of living the Gospel that emerges is destined to

³ Nancy Sylvester, IHM, "LCWR Assembly 2000: Risk The Sacred Journey." iccdinstitute.org. August 18, 2000. www.iccdinstitute.org/Eltest/impasse. Accessed February 19, 2015.

become one of the most influential movements of our time for the Catholic Church and the world at large.

Investigation

Before we begin an exploration of the genesis of the investigation of the LCWR, some initial comments need to be made. This process is still ongoing, which means that what is being said now will be viewed in the future through a much longer lens and understood within a richer context. That does not mean, however, that it does not have immediate implications to be explored. What will be presented here will be a timeline of events as they have been reported, responses from the LCWR and the Vatican concerning both the Apostolic Visitation and the Doctrinal Assessment, and observations from both sides of the spectrum. This situation and the deep reflection it has evoked from the LCWR demonstrate in stark relief the process of renewal that has been ongoing since before the onset of the Second Vatican Council. It is a journey of immense discovery and even greater importance for us all.

As tensions between the hierarchy and religious communities belonging to the LCWR grew, signs of things to come began to surface. In October 2008, a Symposium on Consecrated Life was held at Stone Hill College in North Easton, Massachusetts, called “Apostolic Religious Life Since Vatican II...Reclaiming the Treasure: Bishops, Theologians, and Religious in Conversation.”⁴ Two talks, one given by Cardinal Franc

⁴ Sara Butler, "Apostolic Religious Life: A Public, Ecclesial Vocation." Zenit. October 14, 2008. www.zenit.org. Accessed November 11, 2014.

Rodé and one presented by Sister Sara Butler, SMBT, discussed the role of Apostolic religious women and the problems they saw brewing among the women belonging to the LCWR. Sara Butler used her talk to discuss the differing interpretations of what “renewal” meant within the documents of the Second Vatican Council. She delineated between those congregations that remain “traditional” and those belonging to the LCWR who have become “liberal” or in some cases “radical”⁵ and asked how the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience were being lived out. Butler called into question the understanding and practice of these vows by more “liberal” congregations and reiterated the importance of the vow of obedience as the way “to submit our wills to our lawful superiors when they command in keeping with the constitutions.”⁶ The area of obedience carried over into many other concerns for Butler.

Sister Butler went on to point out that for some women religious, a ministry centered on helping the poor and marginalized evolved into a stance for “some [religious] to assume a ‘prophetic’ vocation to eradicate alleged injustices in the Church.”⁷ She warned those who follow this path that they were “on a collision course with the magisterium” that would lead to some leaving the church.⁸ Butler carried these concerns to this question: “Is it time, perhaps, for a formal ‘visitation’?”⁹

Cardinal Rodé, also concerned with the interpretation of the documents of Vatican II, compared one path as a “hermeneutic of discontinuity and rupture,” to the more

⁵ Ibid., 2, 7.

⁶ Sara Butler, "Apostolic Religious Life: A Public, Ecclesial Vocation." October 14, 2008. www.zenit.org. Accessed November 11, 2014, 3.

⁷ Ibid. 9

⁸ Ibid., 9.

⁹ Ibid., 9.

conservative path of a “hermeneutic of reform” or “renewal in the continuity of the one subject-the Church which the Lord has given us.”¹⁰ Rodé praised “genuine religious life” which includes a “more faithful observance of the rule,” “renouncing the world” and the adaptation of the habit (a mode of dress religious women wear to set them apart), “implying it should remain.”¹¹ He warned that the perceived secularization of religious life would lead to the “complete rupture of some with the past” going “against the nature of a religious congregations” and provoking “God’s rejection.”¹²

For many in religious life, these speeches went either under the radar or were not taken seriously.¹³ However, on December 22, 2008, Cardinal Rodé launched a formal procedure asking the Vatican to look into the “quality of life of apostolic institutes,” which fell under the leadership of the LCWR.¹⁴ This Apostolic Visitation would be carried out over the next six years, ending in December of 2014.

This Apostolic Visitation was spearheaded by Mother Mary Clare Millea, ASCJ, and aided by women religious recruited to help. Sr. Millea’s process was four-fold. First, she met or communicated with the superiors of those congregations chosen for “visitation,” or investigation.¹⁵ Each Superior was required to describe their communities in writing. Sandra Schneiders, IHM, a New Testament scholar and an expert on religious

¹⁰ Cardinal Franc Rodé. “Reforming Religious Life With The Right Hermeneutic” Web. www.zenit.org . October 13, 2014.

¹¹ Ibid., 8, 9.

¹² Ibid., 7.

¹³ Sandra Schneiders. *Prophets in Their Own Country: Women Religious Bearing Witness to the Gospel in a Troubled Church* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2011), 6.

¹⁴ Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life. *Apostolic Visitation of Institutes of Women Religious in the United States*. January 9, 2012. Press Release.

¹⁵ Ibid.

life noted that, “their communities were internally quite healthy and stable but that their most serious problems were ‘externally generated’ by circumstances outside of their control including ‘the institutional Church.’”¹⁶

The next phase consisted of a “comprehensive questionnaire”¹⁷ which Sandra Schneider characterizes as a “massive, detailed, and highly intrusive” method of gleaning information in a way that appeared to be looking for “evidence of laxity and secularism, disobedience to Church law and teaching, disloyalty to the hierarchy, and, of course, the hated ‘feminism.’”¹⁸ It also included a request for personal and financial information. Many congregations chose to respond vaguely or merely sent Sister Millea a copy of their Constitution as a response.¹⁹

The third phase involved on-site visits that included one-on-one interviews. These were conducted by Sister Millea and other women religious and were held in private, with the information elicited kept secret.²⁰ The women who aided Sister Millea were required to sign a “Profession of Faith” and an “Oath of Loyalty” to the Holy See.²¹ The congregations repeatedly asked the Vatican for access to this information in order to “verify...the contents for factual accuracy, accidental or deliberate misinterpretation, or

¹⁶ Sandra Schneiders, *Prophets in Their Own Country: Women Religious Bearing Witness to the Gospel in a Troubled Church* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011), 15.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life. *Apostolic Visitation of Institutes of Women Religious in the United States*. January 9, 2012. Press Release.

²¹ Sandra Schneiders, *Prophets in Their Own Country: Women Religious Bearing Witness to the Gospel in a Troubled Church* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011).

outright misrepresentation or lies,”²² but were refused. The fourth phase involved the processing of these interviews and preparation of a written report that was submitted to the Congregation for Consecrated Life in late 2011. The concluding remarks concerning this report were announced in December of 2014.

While concerns over the state of life of women religious had prompted a visitation from the Congregation for Consecrated Life, deep misunderstanding and lack of trust prompted an investigation of the leadership for these communities. In April of 2008, the Congregation of the Doctrine for the Faith began a probe of the LCWR’s adherence to Catholic doctrine. This Doctrinal Investigation involved three areas of concern: “Addresses at LCWR Assemblies,” “Policies of Corporate Dissent,” and “Radical Feminism.”²³ Bishop Leonard Blair of Toledo, Delegate for the Assessment, informed the LCWR that the investigation was “a result of several years of examination of the doctrinal content of statements from the LCWR and of their annual conferences.”²⁴

In the first area of concern, the CDF stated, “addresses given during LCWR annual Assemblies manifest problematic statements and serious theological, even doctrinal errors.”²⁵ They challenged in particular a talk given by Sr. Laurie Brink in August of 2007, which the CDF saw as a “cry for help.”²⁶ In her talk, Brink posited four potential pathways she saw religious congregations following, including one that

²² Ibid., 18.

²³ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. *Doctrinal Assessment of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious*. USCCB.org. April 18, 2012.

²⁴ Ibid., 3.

²⁵ Ibid., 2.

²⁶ Ibid.

involves “moving beyond Church, even beyond Jesus.”²⁷ She did not promote this path, but merely made the observation that this one model is a reality for some congregations.²⁸ In fact, she stated explicitly that she was a proponent of a “reconciliation “ model that lends itself to a “future for women religious that upholds our dignity as reflections of the divine equal to that of our brothers, respects our baptismal promises, and honors our commitment to the Mission of Jesus,” as a means of becoming “reconciled to the institutional Church.”²⁹ Taken alone, the words “beyond Church” and “beyond Jesus” would seem alarming. However, within the full context of her address, they are merely an observation, not a call for abandoning the church.

The next concern, “policies of corporate dissent,” focused on the LCWR’s protests over lack of women’s ordination and their “pastoral approach to ministry to homosexual persons.”³⁰ In particular, the CDF targeted the New Ways Ministry, co-founded by sister Jeannine Gramick, SSND, which ministers to the LGBT community. By supporting this ministry, the CDF saw the LCWR as placing “themselves outside the Church’s teaching.”³¹

The third and final area of apprehension for the hierarchy involved “radical feminism.” Their complaints included charges of distortion of faith through unorthodox theological explorations, views of “patriarchy” that do not fall in line with the doctrinal view of Jesus’ structure of “sacramental life,” and efforts to undermine, through radical

²⁷ Laurie Brink, OP. “A Marginal Life: Pursuing Holiness in the 21st Century.” LCWR Keynote Address. Lcwr.org August 2, 2007, 17.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid., 17.

³⁰ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Doctrinal Assessment of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious*. USCCB.org. April 18, 2012.

³¹ Ibid., 3.

feminist views, “the revealed doctrines of the Holy Trinity, the divinity of Christ, and the inspiration of Sacred Scripture.”³² It is important to point out that at this time Sister Elizabeth Johnson, CSJ, a noted feminist theologian, had recently published *Quest for the Living God*, an examination of theologies of God that included a feminist perspective. The author and book would later become a target of censure by the United States Bishops, but was surely in the CDF’s sights as this investigation progressed.

A final assessment from the CDF stated that the “current doctrinal and pastoral situation” for religious women was of “grave” concern. This concern not only involved the U.S. women religious, but put other countries’ congregations at risk as well.³³ They determined that the Holy See needed to intervene to “effect reform” and, the CDF would oversee this change.³⁴ These reforms were presented as a mandate that included five points: (1) revise LCWR statutes under the approval of the Congregation of Consecrated Life; (2) review LCWR plans and programs, particularly their handbook, formation of Superiors, and choice of future presenters at LCWR meetings under the oversight of a bishop charged to oversee the process; (3) better educate LCWR members in church doctrine; (4) reform uses of liturgical texts and norms including Liturgy of the Hours and Eucharist as a priority; and (5) to “review LCWR links with affiliated organizations, e.g. Network and Resource Center for Religious Life.”³⁵ This mandate, finalized in July of 2012, called for implementing this reform over a five-year period. Archbishop J. Peter

³² Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Doctrinal Assessment of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious*. USCCB.org. April 18, 2012.

³³ Ibid., 3.

³⁴ Ibid., 4.

³⁵ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Doctrinal Assessment of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious*. USCCB.org. April 18, 2012.

Sartain was appointed by the Congregation of the Doctrine for the Faith to “oversee LCWR.”³⁶ As we will explore, the hierarchy’s idea of reform and the LCWR’s are very different.

The LCWR response to both the Apostolic Visitation and Doctrinal Investigation was one of shock. In a statement in February 2009, LCWR leadership made clear that “the planned visitation comes as a surprise” and that “its purpose and implications for the lives of U.S. women religious remain unclear.”³⁷ Because of their extensive practice of discernment, prayer and reflection, they felt each congregation was fully aware of its strengths and weaknesses. While what was behind this visitation remained ambiguous, they would welcome the opportunity for further reflection.³⁸ The reaction to the doctrinal assessment was “disappointment.”³⁹ However, once again the leadership focused on the desire for dialogue with anyone willing to listen.⁴⁰

What is at the heart of this investigation? The roles of women in the world had changed drastically, particularly in the U.S., and many religious women began to integrate the claim for equality in their ministries as they saw the effects of the disparity on the poor they served. For years, religious had been viewed as the “arm” of the church, doing the labor-intensive work of schools, hospitals and orphanages. That changed when those communities embracing Vatican II grew into a new understanding of mission, and

³⁶ Annmarie Sanders, IHM., *Leadership Conference of Women Religious Decides Next Steps in Responding to CDF Report*. Press Release. LCWR.org. August 10, 2012.

³⁷ LCWR, *LCWR National Board’s Statement on the Vatican’s Apostolic Visitation*. LCWR.org. Feb. 20, 2009.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ LCWR, *LCWR Officers Statement on Doctrinal Assessment of LCWR*. LCWR.org. Press Release. April 23, 2009.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

clarified who they answer to: the Gospel message of Jesus Christ. The institutional church, unhappy with its changing role, responded with a call to “reform the reform,”⁴¹ which put the LCWR at odds with not only the Vatican but also those fellow women religious who embrace the return of a “traditional” form of religious life. However, for the LCWR, the reasons go much deeper.

In her presidential address to the LCWR assembly in August of 2012, Pat Farrell, OSF, described the investigation as nothing less than a “paradigm shift” in the way both the church and the world are being challenged.⁴² She stated:

The cosmic breaking down and breaking through we are experiencing gives us a broader context. Many institutions, traditions, and structures seem to be withering. Why? I believe the philosophical underpinnings of the way we’ve organized reality no longer hold. The human family is not served by individualism, patriarchy, a scarcity mentality, or competition. The world is outgrowing the dualistic constructs of superior/inferior, win/lose, good/bad, and domination/submission. Breaking through in their place are equality, communion, collaboration, synchronicity, expansiveness, abundance, wholeness, mutuality, intuitive knowing, and love.⁴³

The operative values that define the hierarchical Church are being challenged on an existential level. Who better to lash out at than those within the ranks who have found a way to embrace the changes?

How did the church and the women religious in the United States come to this moment of conflict? What radical changes occurred since the Second Vatican Council that have threatened the hierarchy to the extent that it warrants such an investigation?

⁴¹ Sandra Schneiders, *Prophets in Their Own Country: Women Religious Bearing Witness to the Gospel in a Troubled Church* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011).

⁴² Pat Farrell, OSF, “Navigating the Shifts.” LCWR Presidential Address. LCWR.org. August, 2012, 2.

⁴³ Pat Farrell, OSF, “Navigating the Shifts.” LCWR Presidential Address. LCWR.org. August 11, 2012, 2.

Before we explore the documents that set off this trajectory, a brief description of life for women religious before the council is in order.

According to Sandra Schneiders, IHM, an expert on women's religious life, "women religious in the United States, from their arrival on these shores in the 1700's through the founding of literally hundreds of non-enclosed congregations in the two centuries prior to the Council, were probably the most important factor in the establishment of the Roman Catholic Church in the United States."⁴⁴ They set up Catholic schools, hospitals, and social service agencies that served the large Catholic immigrant population.⁴⁵ By keeping these populations largely segregated from the broader American culture, a burst of growth centering on new dioceses and schools took place.⁴⁶

Life for religious women was often one of segregation, silence, blind obedience, and prayer as a means of obtaining "perfection." According to a Sister of Notre Dame who entered the congregation in the early 1960's, life was centered around a strict ritual of prayer, silence during most meals, and structure, structure, structure. If a girl entered the novitiate while still in high school, she could no longer speak to anyone. Once graduated and fully living in the convent, contact with family was cut off and focus on community was strictly enforced. For Christmas, young novices were allowed to talk in certain areas for the day, open presents (which were quickly turned over to the Superior), and possibly speak at a meal. There were no phone calls home or visits with family.

⁴⁴ Sandra Schneiders, *Prophets in Their Own Country: Women Religious Bearing Witness to the Gospel in a Troubled Church* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011), 18.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

Family births, baptisms, weddings, and even death were off limits. The focus was prayer and God and the following of the vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. As Cardinal Joseph Suenens remarked, “Religious too often seem to be living in a closed world, turned in on themselves and having but tenuous contact with the outside world.”⁴⁷ Their contact with the outside world was often limited to work within the Catholic institutions they worked for; community life was lived very separate from the secular world.

Within the church, women religious were seen as “the highest ranking women in the Church.”⁴⁸ They did the most work (with little or no pay) and were forced to “find ways to live with clerical and hierarchical oppression of all sorts.”⁴⁹ Yet they were seen as superior to the laity in the spiritual and ecclesial sense. “In a very real way Religious experienced the validation of their lives in their special status as those called not only to a ‘higher vocation,’ to a ‘closer following’ of Jesus, but also to a deeper participation in the official ministry of the Church, which excluded all women from the clergy.”⁵⁰ The transformation on the horizon in the form of the Second Vatican Council would bring about changes both longed for and unanticipated.

Seeds of Change

⁴⁷ Leon Joseph Cardinal Suenens, *The Nun in the World: The Religious and the Apostolate*. (Westminster, MD: The Newman Press, 1963), 17.

⁴⁸ Sandra Schneiders, *Prophets in Their Own Country: Women Religious Bearing Witness to the Gospel in a Troubled Church* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011), 20.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 21.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

Well before Pope John XXIII's election in 1958 and his call for a council the following year, the Catholic Church was beginning to experience changes from within. For centuries the church saw itself as a "perfect society," above and outside the secular world.⁵¹ Religious life separated a woman from the world in a radical way through dress, ritual, and communal way of living. Women religious communities worked with children in schools and orphanages, hospitals, at the order of the local bishops and under the authority of a Mother Superior. Their lives were not their own not only in the physical sense, but also in the intellectual, spiritual, and psychological sense as well. As such, many women had not been allowed to become fully realized adults, and were instead treated like children who required protection from the outside world and in some ways from themselves. As Cardinal Suenens wrote in his 1963 book, *The Nun in the World*:

An observer analyzing the part played by religious today cannot help being struck by their absence from the main spheres of influence at adult levels, spheres where they have a right to be and where their talents are called for and their presence is needed.⁵²

This separate life women religious led was being challenged on several fronts. A growing lay apostolate was seen as an alternative to religious life. This developing role of the laity warranted two gatherings in Rome of the World Congress for the Lay Apostolate in 1951 and 1957, as lay people began "to claim their baptismal identity."⁵³ Added to this trend was an increasing struggle with the demands of a shrinking congregation and an increased workload. "Many religious institutes were staffed by elderly, overworked

⁵¹ Sandra Schneiders, IHM, *New Wineskins: Re-imaging Religious Life Today* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press 1986), 25.

⁵² Leon Joseph Cardinal Suenens, *The Nun in the World: The Religious and the Apostolate* (Westminster, MD: The Newman Press, 1963), 25.

⁵³ Maryanne Confoy, *Religious Life and Priesthood: Rediscovering Vatican II* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2008), 180.

religious who were suffering from the tensions between their ever-increasing ministerial demands and their efforts to live their religious lives according to the rigid structures of a juridical, regulated semi-monastic timetable and lifestyle.”⁵⁴

The issue lay not only within the religious communities, but also between the congregations of religious and the “ambivalence that characterized the relationship between the Vatican and religious men and women.”⁵⁵ The world was changing and this change called for adaptation and renewal; a process that Rome, with its juridical view of ministry, was slow to realize. For women religious, who were on the lowest rung of the hierarchical ladder, the change that was coming was a radical one that would become, as Sandra Schneiders puts it, “foundation-shaking.”⁵⁶

Two related events that took place before Vatican II set the stage for the hard work the communities would encounter. First, the Sister Formation Movement was created.⁵⁷ This was in response to a growing need for more educated teachers and developed into programs for intellectual, spiritual, and professional development.⁵⁸ The women became highly educated and, as a result, increasingly aware of issues outside their community and the walls that enclosed them. From this movement developed a “Sister Formation Bulletin,” a periodical designed to share lectures, discussions, ideas,

⁵⁴ Ibid., 181.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 183.

⁵⁶ Sandra Schneiders, IHM. *New Wineskins: Re-imaging Religious Life Today* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press 1986), 23.

⁵⁷ Lora Ann Quinonez, CDP, and Mary Daniel Turner, SNDdeN, *The Transformation of American Catholic Sisters* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1992), 6.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 7.

and news among communities.⁵⁹ Religious women's education and communication spurred a growth in relationship across congregations, which would serve well in the times ahead. As Vatican II came to a close and women religious began to make choices about the change they would implement, they came as the most educated women in the church. The passion for learning would be a great gift and, in some cases, a real threat to the church hierarchy.

The Second Vatican Council

Faced with a quickly changing world still grappling with the horrors of World War II, the Second Vatican Council began to debate the issues facing the Catholic Church in the fall of 1962. For Pope John and many others, the issues at hand concerned a church that needed to become engaged with the modern world. For hundreds of years the church had seen itself as fighting the influence of outside secular forces. This entrenchment, brought on by the intense secularism of the Enlightenment, was no longer viable in a world so affected by two World Wars and the horror of the Holocaust. John

⁵⁹ Ibid., 9.

XXIII called for an updating, or *aggiornamento*, and a return to the Gospel as a way forward for the Catholic Church and the world.⁶⁰

From the documents being developed during the years of the council, a new way of talking about being church began to emerge. Gone was the juridical language based on canon law, and in its place came a pastoral language that embraced the world. The church became “mystery” and its members the “people of God.”⁶¹ Instead of the adversarial approach of past councils, this council claimed “solidarity of the Church with the whole human family.”⁶²

There also emerged a return to the deepest part of what it meant to be a member of this family--baptism. Through baptism, each woman and man is called to holiness; each person is called to be part of a priestly people.⁶³ “The baptized, by regeneration and the anointing of the Holy Spirit, are consecrated as a spiritual house and a holy priesthood, that through all their Christian activities they may offer spiritual sacrifices and proclaim the marvels of him who has called them out of the darkness into his wonderful light.”⁶⁴ All women and men were called to witness the Gospel through holiness, whether they “belong to the hierarchy or are cared for by it.”⁶⁵ Lay men and women, women religious, priests and bishops were all reminded of their original call to God’s family through baptism.

⁶⁰ Edward P. Hahnenberg, *A Concise Guide to the Documents of Vatican II* (Cincinnati, OH: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 2007), 2-4.

⁶¹ *Lumen Gentium*, n. 1. All references to the documents of Vatican II are from Austin Flannery, O.P., ed., *The Basic Sixteen Documents: Vatican Council II: Constitutions, Decrees, Declarations* (Northport, NY: Costello Publishing Co., 1996).

⁶² *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 1.

⁶³ *Lumen Gentium*, n. 10.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, n. 39.

For women religious the documents of the council were life changing. *Lumen Gentium*, or the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, and *Perfectae Caritatis*, the Decree on the Up-To-Date Renewal of Religious Life, spoke directly to the place religious held in the church and the steps they were called to take to live out their chosen life. *Gaudium et Spes*, or Church in the Modern World, called many religious to engage a world they had been told to reject. As stated previously, those in religious life had been separated in many ways from their lay brothers and sisters. They had believed that the vows of chastity, poverty, and obedience were part of a call to a “higher life,” giving them a “superior vocation.”⁶⁶ While regular Christians merely followed the Ten Commandments, the evangelical councils, or vows, bound women religious. *Lumen Gentium* and its call for a full spiritual life for all, and *Gaudium et Spes*, which reversed hundreds of years of isolationism in its turn toward and *in* the world, drastically changed that view.⁶⁷

Religious women began to view their lives through a new lens. They lived a life quite distinct from laymen and women to be sure, but, as chapter 6 from *Lumen Gentium* pointedly reminded them, they were not the “middle way” between hierarchy and laity.⁶⁸ God called them for this special way of life to be lived in community, taking vows of chastity, poverty, and obedience, “dedicating themselves wholly to God.”⁶⁹ What was their place within the church? What did living a vowed religious life mean? In light of

⁶⁶ Sandra Schneiders, IHM. *New Wineskins: Re-imaging Religious Life Today* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press 1986), 24.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ *Lumen Gentium*, n. 43.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

these questions, many women religious began to ask themselves what the point of all their sacrifice was if it did not make one “superior?”⁷⁰

While *Lumen Gentium* called all men and women to holiness, *Perfectae Caritatis* called religious women and men to adaptation and renewal through a return to the Gospel and the “spirit of the founder.”⁷¹ The new emphasis in *Perfectae Caritatis* was the hearing of a call to a “radical and unconditional imitation” of Christ’s life that invites some of the baptized to leave all and follow Christ in a public witness and life commitment to the mission of Christ.⁷² As they focused on the message of Christ through the Gospels, congregations were called to revisit the foundational call of their orders. It was through the Holy Spirit that their original *charism*, or purpose, was inspired. As a result of *Perfectae Caritatis*’ direction, religious congregations began to focus on a return to the foundation of their order as a way to live out the Gospel.⁷³

For many congregations, however, it was the message of *Gaudium et Spes*, or the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, that radically challenged their understanding and living of their professed vows. Instead of an enclosed environment, protected from the evil of the secular world, *Gaudium et Spes* focused on the “human person” in “totality.”⁷⁴ They were called to “carry on the work of Christ” to “bear witness” in the world.⁷⁵ The document reminded all believers that Christ was present in

⁷⁰ Schneiders, *New Wineskins*, 24.

⁷¹ Maryanne Confoy, *Religious Life and Priesthood: Rediscovering Vatican II* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2008), 207.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 3.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

human history and, as such, lived, served, and died *in* the world as well.⁷⁶ He “established, after his death and resurrection, a new communion of sisters and brothers among all who receive him in faith and love;” a community that lives in “solidarity” with those sisters and brothers.⁷⁷

This call to be in the “world” led to life changing questions. What does the “world” mean? For hundreds of years, the world was a place to be avoided unless under the protection of the church. The mission was to be of service to the church and her leaders; apostolic ministry was a way to grow the church, not the locus of a congregation’s mission.⁷⁸ Yet the spirit of this document was calling for something completely different, a return to the message of the Gospel, rooted in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. As Jesus lived in solidarity with the people of his time, religious women began to question and explore the implications for their understanding and practice of how they would live that message.⁷⁹ How would they live out their vows of chastity, poverty and obedience in relation to what we are called to be in this world? What do these vows even mean given the new context they were called to embrace?

As each order began this time of self-reflection and discernment, the council asked that they begin by looking at their modes of prayer, their dress, and their form of governance. “For this reason, constitutions, directories, books of customs, of prayers, of ceremonies and such should be suitably revised, obsolete prescriptions being suppressed,

⁷⁶ Ibid., n. 32.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Schneiders, *Buying the Field: Catholic Religious Life in Mission to the World* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2013), xiii.

⁷⁹ Ibid., x.

and should be brought into line with this synod's documents."⁸⁰ The council, in effect, was asking each congregation to look at every aspect of how they lived their lives as vowed religious. They were given permission for "prudent experimentation" and asked to do this centered always in prayer. This statement was profoundly freeing and frightening. On the one hand, a whole new world of opportunity opened up for these women. On the other hand, those qualities that set them apart from the world, which for many defined their understanding of religious life, were about to be torn apart. The years that followed were a time of intense growth and change, bringing with it great joy and great sorrow.

Women religious congregations had to consider several things in light of the documents coming from the council. Where they had previously been called to separate themselves from the world through their vows, dress, semi-enclosed lifestyle and demeanor, the church now called for a radical openness to the world they had been told to reject. The sense of identity that had been fostered for some congregations for hundreds of years was in crisis. As Sandra Schneiders relates, the question was a profound one:

Religious could only continue to be at the heart of the modern Church if they made their own its commitment to be in, with, and for the world in solidarity with all people of good will, Christians, non-Christians, and even non-believers. But how could religious become truly "worldly" in this new and positive sense without abandoning not only the lifestyle of separation from the world but especially that essential component of the theology of religious life, renunciation of the world through the evangelical councils?⁸¹

In a sense, they could not. Congregations would have to choose between a path of holding on to the recent past by resisting change, or delving into their own deeper past and the original *charisms* that had been the initial impetus for their formation. What were

⁸⁰ *Perfectae Caritatis*, n. 3.

⁸¹ Schneiders, *New Wineskins*, 26.

they being called to let go of and what would emerge as a result? Where would this call lead them as they headed off into the wilderness of discernment, clinging to the Spirit that had called them to this place?

A Sign of the Times

As we explore the journey of the renewal religious took post-Vatican II, we must place their story in the proper context. The council ended in 1965 during a time of incredible change and upheaval in the United States. Rome was still dealing with the ramifications of the Second World War and the horrors of the Holocaust, while the United States was embroiled in the Vietnam War, deeply divided over civil rights and women's equality issues, growing in an increasing awareness of the plight of the poor and displaced, and entering into a post-modern world view. The church's call to embrace the "modern world," a place with a "unified spiritual project within a unified worldview," was not what religious in the U.S. encountered.⁸²

For the church and the religious who served under its authority, the changes from the Council moved them from a medieval mindset of community and authority into a world without a united belief system. As the church called the faithful to embrace the modern world, the world it seemed, had left modernity behind. Replacing a cohesive worldview was a society characterized by fragmentation, existential rootlessness,

⁸² Sandra Schneider, *Finding the Treasure*, (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2000), 107.

relativism, and a loss of a common human story.⁸³ Not only were these religious communities entering a time of internal change and upheaval, they were asked to minister to a world that was in the midst of turmoil as well.

The renewal was interpreted and experienced differently by individual congregations. Outside of explicitly cloistered communities, those religious who lived in convents and worked in the outside world experienced the call for renewal in two distinct ways. The first way closely followed the updating called for in *Perfectae Caritatis*. This may have included a change in habit and rituals and certainly involved a study and return to the foundational *charism* of the congregation through prayer and communal discernment.⁸⁴

The second path involved looking at renewal called for in *Perfectae* through the lens of *Gaudium et Spes* and *Lumen Gentium*. These documents, as mentioned previously, not only celebrated a “universal call to holiness” for all of the faithful, they called all women religious to move from the elite, enclosed world they inhabited somewhere between hierarchy and laity, out in to “the Modern World” called for in *Gaudium et Spes*.⁸⁵ The transformation they sought became much deeper than the outward symbols of change in religious life that they were working to embrace. They began to examine their focus as they took a turn from institution to mission – from rule of law to the Reign of God

⁸³ Ibid., 113.

⁸⁴ Schneiders, *Buying the Field*, 370.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

Initial change for religious came quickly. The way of governance shifted from “superiors and their subjects” to “development of creative and responsive leadership.”⁸⁶ The call became a renewed attention to the Gospel and how to live that call in the world. This would require “structural and attitudinal changes.”⁸⁷ As Lora Ann Quinonez, CDP, and Mary Daniel Turner, SNDdeN, point out, “American Sisters found themselves increasingly driven to incorporate ‘action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world’ into their formulation of religious identity.”⁸⁸

This identity would be formed from an interior search that incorporated both a response to the history and foundation of the original community and a growing contemplation of the experiential process of living the religious life in an entirely new stance. Many communities no longer looked for validation from a patriarchal system and chose instead to explore the true focus of their devotion and mission. This exploration however would lead to a very painful period and huge loss of numbers of women religious. With outward changes in dress, ritual and living situations came a realization for some that they could live a life of holiness outside of a convent. Opportunities for women in the broader society drew many women away as well. If religious life did not make one “special” then why stay? Membership had been cut in half. The changes were

⁸⁶ Lora Ann Quinonez, CDP, and Mary Daniel Turner, SNDdeN, *The Transformation of American Catholic Sisters* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1992), 21.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

appreciated, but the pain of loss led to an existential crisis that was worrisome and threatening.⁸⁹

Not only were these women attempting to redefine religious life as they lived it, they were also on the defense against a hierarchy that was often looking to reform the reform.⁹⁰ Communities had drastically changed their way of governing toward an inclusive, open, and communal way of collaborating as congregation. What arose from this was a movement away from being the workforce of the clergy toward a Gospel driven mission informed by a renewed sense of what religious life means through living out their vows.⁹¹ This independence of purpose, although intrinsically Catholic, was unfamiliar and threatening to a patriarchal system that remained based on a monarchical structure of governance.⁹² This was and remains cause for great tension between the hierarchy and those communities, as illustrated by the doctrinal investigation and Apostolic Visitation previously discussed.

Religious communities were being battered on many sides. As many in the community were leaving, very few were entering. The hierarchy, looking from the outside, saw this as a sign that the reforms had failed and that a return to pre-conciliar ways were needed. Those who remained however knew that the reasons for so many leaving were much more complicated and touched on deeper issues than mere failure of renewal. As Sandra Schneider, in the first volume of her three part series on religious life, *Finding the Treasure*, explains: religious women on a large scale were in the midst of a

⁸⁹ Sandra Schneiders, *Prophets in Their Own Country: Women Religious Bearing Witness to the Gospel in a Troubled Church* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011), 44-46.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Schneiders, *Finding the Treasure*, 127.

⁹² Schneiders, *Buying the Field*, 428-29.

“Dark Night.”⁹³ This spiritual journey, described by John of the Cross, is marked by several stages, beginning with a very active stage of change and renewal, and moving quickly to a more passive experience involving a loss of control and a loss of bearings. As she tells it, “This pattern is fairly clear in the recent experience of Religious who energetically undertook the renewal of their life in the wake of Vatican II and have found themselves progressively less in control of the developments that have followed, including both the fallout of the Council and the emergence of postmodernity.”⁹⁴

In the midst of this dark night, many had the feeling of losing their way both in mission and spiritual life. But as Schneiders puts it, this very difficult time was an important step to a deepening understanding of what it meant to be religious. “The real purpose of this night of spirit is to strip away the “sweetness” of the spiritual life and drive the person into a naked faith in which one seeks God rather than the gifts of God; where nothing, not even the ‘spiritual life,’ competes with God for one’s love.”⁹⁵ Emerging from this purgative process brought a theological and experiential understanding of self and community in relation to God and through the changing understanding and practice of their lived vows.

Emerging Vows

⁹³ Schneiders, *Finding the Treasure*, 159.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 161.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 163.

The vows of chastity, poverty, and obedience are central to life as a religious woman. The profession of these vows is a public, solemn, and formal proclamation of a new relationship in and with the world.⁹⁶ Before Vatican II, these vows constituted a virtual “death to the world” where a congregation would live apart from the secular world in order to be protected from its “evils,” only participating outside the walls of the community in Catholic centered institutions.⁹⁷ This “death to the world” is still intrinsic to the understanding of religious life, but from an entirely different vantage point. According to Schneiders, the “world” religious die to is the “evil reality construction” that permeates the human experience.⁹⁸ This new life, freely chosen, commits one to the Reign of God with totality, thus renouncing, or “dying to” Satan and his kingdom.⁹⁹

Under the construct of the vows that began to emerge as the renewal took shape, religious life realigned itself with the mission that Jesus professed in the Gospel: to bring the good news of God’s Kingdom on earth as he worked to heal the world.¹⁰⁰ Through the lens of *Gaudium et Spes* and its call to engage this world, religious struggled to develop the understanding and practice of vows that called for a presence to many types of people and the issues they were grappling with in the life situation they inhabited. As religious experienced the realities of both who they lived for and how they were going to live in community, far from the enclosed life they were used to, the understanding of chastity, poverty, and obedience were torn apart. What arose, through trial and error and

⁹⁶ Schneiders, *Buying the Field*, 102.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Schneiders, *Buying the Field*, 103.

the purgative experience of a communal dark night, was a much deeper and more mature awareness of the vows they were living.¹⁰¹

To understand the vows, particularly if one is not a professed religious, one must begin at a common starting point: the Christian understanding of the human experience of God in a particular time and place in history, mediated through the life, passion, crucifixion, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. From this starting point, as professed by the church, all baptized are called to encounter and be in relationship with God. It is *how* God is experienced that distinguishes other forms of baptismal fulfillment.. As Sandra Schneiders puts it, the difference begins with where one “starts.”¹⁰²

To start with creation and discern God present and at work in all things is different from starting with God as the *first* point of reference in which all thought and action originate. Religious Life has something to do with being drawn to the latter one’s characteristic approach to God.¹⁰³

It is in this response to God as the starting point that celibacy is embraced as the underlying context for religious life.¹⁰⁴

As an expression of the vow of chastity, consecrated celibacy is, at its center, “the love relationship between the Religious and Christ.”¹⁰⁵ It is the relational reality of religious to this world, church, religious community, and always, God. It begins with a personal call from Jesus to the individual to be in this exclusive relationship.¹⁰⁶ This “single-minded God-Quest” is in essence an existential solitude, but that does not make it

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 104.

¹⁰² Schneider, *Finding the Treasure*, 131.

¹⁰³ Ibid (emphasis mine).

¹⁰⁴ Schneiders, *Buying the Field*, 104.

¹⁰⁵ Schneiders, *Finding the Treasure*, 129.

¹⁰⁶ Schneiders, *Buying the Field*, 102.

an isolated life form in most instances. “Celibate solitude is the root of immediacy to God as mode of Christian experience and social marginality as a position in the world,” grounding it as a prophetic way of life.¹⁰⁷ To live in consecrated celibacy is to live a life rooted in contemplative prayer as a response to “God’s own invitation.”¹⁰⁸

According to Sandra Schneiders in her second volume on religious life, *Selling All*, consecrated celibacy for women religious is quite different from the male-centered view that dominates most understanding of what it means to be celibate. For Schneiders, “Male chastity was primarily about self-control on the one hand and self-preservation for ‘higher’ things on the other.”¹⁰⁹ Religious women’s focus was not preservation *from*, but preservation *for* a relationship with God.¹¹⁰ The relationship was one of “free disposition of oneself in relation to Christ.”¹¹¹ While the interior experience of both women and men cannot be so easily generalized, what is important to note is the relational grounding of a celibate life style. However one chooses to view that choice, it is the context that informs how the other vows are understood and practiced.

With consecrated celibacy as the foundational reality for vowed religious comes the practices that emerge from that profession – a vow of poverty and obedience. For religious in pre-Vatican II congregations, poverty was perhaps the simplest vow (although certainly not the easiest) to understand and practice. The enclosed, common lives that congregations lived were highly regulated, directing each woman on what to wear, eat and buy. Every possession was by permission of the Superior, which led to an

¹⁰⁷ Schneiders, *Finding the Treasure*, 129.

¹⁰⁸ Schneiders, *Selling All*, 172.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 171.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

“economic immaturity” for many who had entered as young women.¹¹² This lack of engagement with the world caused real confusion. Following the renewal, congregations had to learn how to handle money, property, investments and credit. From an interior stance, religious had to rethink what a vow of poverty truly meant. Day-to-day life fostered a growing awareness of how they were living, what products they were using, and the institutions that were behind their choices. Rooted in the Gospel, religious began to look at who was affected by that institution, particularly the poor who made up the majority of the labor force.¹¹³

In the past, the vow of poverty had been practiced externally through outside control of possessions and actions, and internally, through a stance of detachment and asceticism.¹¹⁴ What unfolded as communities engaged with the world was a public, prophetic experience of poverty as a catalyst for a change in mission lived out through ministry.¹¹⁵ The call to live this prophetic lifestyle grounded in celibacy and expressed in poverty gave rise to some real questions on how to interpret and live this vow, which is still grappled with today. How do you live in solidarity with the poor when your needs are easily provided for? Can one truly experience poverty, or is it patronizing to attempt to imitate it?¹¹⁶

The attempt to understand and fully practice the vow of poverty requires the ability to view this practice from two different perspectives. On the economic front, it is not possible or advisable to become completely destitute. However, to live a life of

¹¹² Schneiders, *Buying the Field*, 148.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 150.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 152.

simplicity and frugality with a ministerial focus toward healing the institutions that are complicit in oppression in its many forms is to live in a form of solidarity. The second factor is to live with an understanding of evangelical poverty, which, like Jesus and his disciples, “is a commitment, by the witness of our life and practice of our ministry, to bringing ‘good news to the poor.’” This witness is a call to be an active part of bringing about the “Reign of God emerging in this world.”¹¹⁷ By seeing the practical and theological implications of what it means to be in solidarity as a path to ecclesial poverty, religious women remain in search of ways to live out the mission called for by Christ.

The growing understanding of the vow of poverty rooted in consecrated celibacy, took place as the role of ministry for religious underwent an enormous transformation. The former roles they occupied in schools, hospitals, and other social services typically run by the church were filled by the laity. At the same time, as each community participated in communal and individual prayer and discernment, the call to address social justice issues began to come to the forefront.¹¹⁸ By a radical return to the Gospel message of Jesus and his ministry, the religious community’s focus turned from a mission of carrying out the work of the hierarchy toward the explicit mission to follow Christ, wherever that would take them.¹¹⁹ The church became the vehicle for carrying out this mission, not the destination. This change in perception coupled with a new understanding of the vow of obedience became, and remains to this day, a point of real tension between the women religious and the hierarchy that seeks to control them.¹²⁰

¹¹⁷ Schneiders, *Buying the Field*, 160.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 150.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 160.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 364-65.

Obedience as a vow is the most radically changed aspect of religious life.¹²¹ Its integration is the cause behind the deepest reforms for religious and the largest point of tension and misunderstanding with the hierarchy. In the many years before Vatican II, every act that took place within religious life was a response to a Constitution, custom, book, horarium, assignment, directive of a superior, or the hierarchy.¹²² Obedience was lived by way of an enclosed lifestyle that supported and sustained the hierarchy through its apostolic work within largely Catholic institutions.¹²³ For many religious, renewal of the vow of obedience ushered in a new form of religious life; a new way of understanding the theology and spirituality behind what it meant to live a vowed, religious life.¹²⁴

If obedience is viewed as merely a posture of following the will of the hierarchy and rules of the congregation, then, as some see it, the vow is obsolete. When it is seen as “charismatically grounded communities who had a legitimate right to self-determination in regard to their lives and ministries,” the understanding and practice of that vow hold a very new, relevant meaning.¹²⁵ With a renewal grounded in the call of *Gaudium et Spes* to be a church in the world and for the world, religious felt called to work for “the alternate world of the Reign of God right in the midst of the reality construction of the Prince of this world,” or Satan.¹²⁶ As they became deeply immersed in the reality on the ground, with God as the lens through which they interpreted and discerned their mission, the focus became more God-led and less institution-centered.

¹²¹ Ibid., 355.

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Ibid., 356.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 357.

What grew from years of contemplative living through prayer, discernment, and action was a way of relating to the very personal call from Christ. Through individual and communal discernment centered on the will of God, religious understood their mission as a lifelong promotion of the Reign of God within the reality of the particular historical context they occupied. The life style and ministries that arose from that understanding came as a prophetic response to God's call; being alongside those they serve while discerning and doing God's work.¹²⁷ The contextual foundation became a radical stance for the Kingdom while speaking truth to power.

By returning to the Gospels and Jesus' life of obedience to his father, religious saw a call to stand for the poor and disenfranchised. For religious, God's Reign meant freedom – freedom from domination and blind submission to authority and freedom for a life based on equality and interdependence.¹²⁸ Like Jesus, many religious communities respect authority, but are not blindly led by it. Following authority without being informed is irresponsible and an act of cowardice.¹²⁹ It is through a mature conscience and process of discernment that an individual and community live their vow of obedience to God alone.

Obviously religious women experience the vows in both a personal and communal way. As unique as each person is, so too is his or her experience of God. For most communities, the lived experience of renewal, with the joy and pain that came with it, was the catalyst for the new understanding and practice of the vows. Consecrated celibacy, evangelical poverty and obedience as a stance of the weak to power in whatever

¹²⁷ Ibid., 359.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 433.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 518.

form it takes, have led to vast and varied work being done on behalf of the poor and disenfranchised, but it has also led to a confrontation or impasse with the powers that be, including Church institutions, political powers and social climates that favor the wealthy and strong over the weak.

Through this work and a growing sense of mission beyond ecclesial power structures, religious women began to discover a sense of self, where equality and cooperation based on mutual respect were not only desired but also expected. Along with teaching, religious women have become lawyers, doctors, theologians, psychiatrists and much more. They long to be of service to the work of the church, and to have an equal voice in how that church is in the world. By serving women who had been systematically damaged by the institutional patriarchal systems that left them unheard or victimized, religious women found a voice both for those they worked with and for themselves as well. As this feminist self-understanding continues to be challenged and strongly feared and mistrusted within the hierarchy, tension and outright acrimony are leveled against them. Yet a new understanding has taken hold:

Perhaps when all is said and done, what feminization has wrought is a fundamental alteration of epistemological frameworks and processes. By grasping the significance of *place* as the vantage point from which one perceives and interprets reality, by grasping the invisible, voiceless *place* assigned to women within social (including religious) systems, by beginning to attend to what they know in the *places* where women live, the sisters have literally come to see different things and see things differently. There is no way women who have awakened can continue to see what they used to see as they used to see it.¹³⁰

¹³⁰ Quinonez and Turner, *The Transformation of American Catholic Sisters*, 111-12.

This transformation continues to this day, fostered by an overall cohesion through leadership and a growing communal practice of “engaging impasse through communal contemplation and dialogue.”¹³¹

Engaging Impasse

Leadership and practice are central to the health and mission of women religious in the United States. It is where they find their common strength and how they process the challenges they face in many areas of their ministry. As demonstrated by the Apostolic Visitation and Doctrinal Assessment, this model of engagement and leadership are threatening to a system that relies on a top-down notion of authority. How do you engage in productive discussion when, for centuries, you have been told what to do and who to answer to? It would be initially frightening, indeed, to be unsure of the outcome – to trust the Spirit. One only has to look at the recent Synod on the Family, which took place in October 2014, to see the strong resistance of some to an open forum. As I will demonstrate, the practices and processes that religious women, particularly those who are part of the Leadership Conference for Women Religious, use to communicate, govern, and discern are the polar opposite of the patriarchal model, but a potential way forward for a fully renewed Church.

As previously stated, living in the “world,” as called for in *Gaudium et Spes*, was deeply transformative for religious women and their communities. These women became

¹³¹ Nancy Sylvester, IHM, and Mary Jo Klick, eds., *Crucible For Change: Engaging Impasse Through Communal Contemplation and Dialogue* (San Antonio, TX: Sor Juana Press, 2004), i.

engaged with the needs of the people they served and they began to see their ministry with those in poverty as a direct connection to the Gospel message of Jesus Christ. This lived experience illuminated long held church doctrine on poverty, sexuality, equality, authority, and power, calling many to question the patriarchal system that sought to define these issues narrowly. Because women religious were at the forefront of many social justice movements from the early years after Vatican II, including working with the National Organization for Women, U.N. commissions on human rights, founding NETWORK, and countless other ministries, they were particularly suited to understand the damage this male dominated system had on the poor-especially poor- and they felt called to engage and confront it.¹³²

These women were and remain fully capable, mature moral agents able to discern both their particular call to ministry and the way that ministry was practiced. As Nancy Sylvester, IHM shared in her 2000 LCWR address, “I see that essential to this expression of religious life is our commitment to ‘action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world as constitutive dimensions to the preaching of the Gospel.’”¹³³ Yet, as they sought to minister to those in need, they found themselves routinely dismissed, censured, or patronized by the very institution that was supposed to support the Gospel mission. This treatment led to pain, anger and feelings of powerlessness. Many began to question themselves or hold back talents or beliefs out of fear.

¹³²Carol K. Coburn, *The Selma Effect: Catholic Nuns and Social Justice 50 Years On*. <http://globalsistersreport.org/news/selma-effect>. March 9, 2015, 17.

¹³³Nancy Sylvester, IHM, “Risk the Sacred Journey: Presidential Address.” August 18, 2000. LCWR Assembly, iccdinstitute.org, 3.

One catalyst for change came out of a 1999 confrontation between the hierarchy and Sister Jeannine Gramick, SSND, co-founder (along with Father Robert Nugent, SDS) of New Ways Ministry, which ministered to the LGBT community. For over ten years they were asked to either bring their work into compliance with Catholic teaching on homosexuality or leave their ministry. “Despite action by the Holy See, Father Nugent and Sister Gramick continued their involvement in activities organized by New Ways Ministry...they also continued to maintain and promote ambiguous positions on homosexuality and explicitly criticized documents of the church’s magisterium on the issue.”¹³⁴ For this they were “permanently prohibited from any pastoral work involving homosexual persons and are ineligible...for any office in their respective institutions.”¹³⁵

The LCWR leadership presented their concerns over the situation and “framed [their] communication within... a call to reconciliation” and with their “understanding of loyal dissent.”¹³⁶ The leadership’s concerns were met with anger and tension. The response focused on a renewed mandate to comply with the “directives of the Holy See.”¹³⁷ The points of tension and impasse that had been a part of the experience for so many women religious had come to a collective point of consciousness and, in Nancy Sylvester’s 2000 address to the LCWR Assembly, it was finally, publicly acknowledged. This address became an impetus for a new way of engaging this painful part of their lives.

¹³⁴ Joseph Ratzinger, “Notification Regarding Sister Jeannine Gramick, SSND and Father Robert Nugent, SDS. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.” July 13, 1999.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Sylvester, “Risk the Sacred Journey,” 5.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

In her address, Sister Sylvester began by reflecting on the encounter with the hierarchy and how vulnerable she felt. This moment brought her to the realization that this type of impasse, characterized by a lack of understanding, lack of dialogue, and an unwillingness to listen, was not an isolated event, but indicative of a deeper, shared experience--one that she had to articulate.¹³⁸

In her initial remarks, Sylvester noted that instead of talking about the important ministries they perform or a deeper understanding of community, she “found herself reflecting and writing about us and our journey and how that journey has intersected with the official Church over these past years.”¹³⁹ She clarified who they are as vowed religious women: women who live in fidelity to the Spirit through the church, women who live out a commitment to action and preaching of the Gospel, women who appreciate the fact that their very womanhood is the “vehicle” of their understanding, and that this understanding brings them into close contact with “sensitive moral issues related to sexuality or woman’s role in moral decision making.”¹⁴⁰

She further clarified:

We are living apostolic, monastic and evangelical religious life within the Roman Catholic tradition. Yet, we know that some Vatican officials do not validate our experience as authentic religious life. They, together with some women religious, see consecrated religious life as a more static life form. In their view, members of religious congregations pursue holiness through the three vows, committing themselves to a corporate and institutional apostolate under the guidance of the hierarchy and in support of the Magisterium. From this more static stance, religious are to hold a clear and unequivocal position in support of the authority of the hierarchy and its right to regulate religious life. To be sure, this understanding of authentic

¹³⁸ Ibid

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 3.

religious life does fit securely into the prevailing worldview operative in a patriarchal clerical culture. But we dare to say that we beg to differ with it.¹⁴¹

Because of this different perspective, tension and conflict mark many of their interactions with Vatican officials. But the desire to be in dialogue, to engage those officials in ways that foster understanding and “change unjust power structures and laws,” is at the heart of living out the Gospel message and to be in right relations with each other.¹⁴² But Sylvester was honest about the toll this tension has taken. The fear and mistrust fosters tentative action and self-censoring for fear of retribution. This fear, if left unexamined, leads to doubt and possibly paralysis.

However, by naming these fears and her hope for a future way forward, Nancy Sylvester gave voice to what many religious had been thinking. “As women religious, to hear our situation of impasse in relation to the institutional Church proclaimed publicly was both exhilarating and heartrending. To stand shoulder-to-shoulder with so many and know that we are not alone filled us with amazing gratitude, affection, and hope.”¹⁴³

Nancy Sylvester, inspired by this prophetic stance of truth to power and the overwhelming reception of her speech, decided that a process of engaging this impasse needed to be explored and developed. In early 2002, she met with fellow religious to develop a model that was “designed as an environment and a process, which invites the participants to enter sacred space to engage in unfolding the impasse by naming, entering

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 5.

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Joellen McCarthy, BVM, Peggy Nolan, BVM, Mary Ann Zollman, BVM, “Becoming The Change We Want to See,” in *Crucible For Change: Engaging Impasse Through Communal Contemplation and Dialogue*, ed. Nancy Sylvester, IHM, and Mary Jo Klick (San Antonio, TX: Sor Juana Press 2004), 51-66.

and embracing it through communal contemplation and dialogue.”¹⁴⁴ This process would take place over the course of a year, and consisted of three meetings, along with a commitment to focused contemplation throughout the year.

With seventy-two participants, including nine lay women, the group embarked on a process that would meet three times over the year, taking them through three levels of engagement with impasse. The first gathering was centered on naming the personal experience of impasse in either an ecclesial or societal environment. Each woman was asked, through periods of contemplation and reflection to revisit not only the experience itself, but also the feelings of anger, fear, self-blame or discouragement that they encountered. The reflection required them to look at the effect this had on them and the people around them. “The process invited the simple direct telling of each person’s impasse story--seeking contemplative understanding not interpretation.”¹⁴⁵ This approach led the group toward a communal contemplation that fostered a deep trust. This trust in each other and in the process that evolved informed each subsequent gathering of women.¹⁴⁶

The second meeting was centered on a deeper understanding of the causes of impasse, with a focus on how each woman was complicit in their own experience. Starting from an awareness of what emotion came from this impasse experience, they were asked to explore where that came from, which “revealed a complexity of

¹⁴⁴Mary McCann, IHM, “Being Present to a Process,” in *Crucible For Change: Engaging Impasse Through Communal Contemplation and Dialogue*, ed. Nancy Sylvester, IHM and Mary Jo Klick (San Antonio, Texas: Sor Juana Press 2004), 23.

¹⁴⁵Ibid., 27.

¹⁴⁶Ibid.

motivations and issues which were suggestive of their complicity in the impasse.”¹⁴⁷

From this came powerful expressions of grief, need for forgiveness, hope for the future, and liberation. “These rituals were powerful expressions of turning to the Divine in the darkness of oneself and of impasse.”¹⁴⁸

The third, and final gathering focused on moving forward, remaining aware that the purpose “was not to resolve impasse but to engage and embrace it.”¹⁴⁹ As each woman named a “shift” that had taken place during this period, some common themes emerged:

The importance of naming the struggle; a radical shift in consciousness; a surrender to who I really am; a profound letting go; a yielding to the divine energy; accepting powerlessness; a radical openness of a loving, anguishing heart; giving up the attachment to winning the struggle; surrendering my own Grand Plan; breathing deeply, [and] seeing the other as human.¹⁵⁰

For Nancy Sylvester and the other participants, this opportunity for continued individual and communal contemplation was an invitation to experience the God within. From this encounter grew an experience of freedom. They began to see “the value of not ‘fitting in’ to the Church and society.”¹⁵¹ They understood their responsibility lay not in directly changing the church or the world, but in claiming their story and “tell[ing] it out loud,” as a prophetic voice.¹⁵²

This stance of freedom through contemplation, engagement, and mutual respect, was, and remains, very threatening to the hierarchy. By its very nature this process

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 29.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 30.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ McCann, “Being Present to a Process,” 31.

¹⁵¹ McCarthy, Nolan, and Zollman, “Becoming The Change We Want to See,”

59.

¹⁵² Ibid.

confronts authoritarian power structures by engaging the fear that can be a part of conflict and used as a mode of control. As illustrated in the beginning of this essay, the response was to attempt to regain that control by questioning the LCWR's ability to govern themselves and their following of church doctrine. By instigating a Doctrinal Assessment, and appointing Bishop Peter Sartain of Seattle to oversee "reform" of the governing body for close to 70,000 women religious, the hierarchy is attempting to reinstate control by appointing a male overseer to make sure that compliance occurs. This process may last up to five years, years in which women religious may feel like prisoners on parole. At the same time, although separately, the Congregation for Consecrated Life conducted the Apostolic Visitation. This focused not only on leadership but on the daily lives of those women who made up the congregations and carried out the ministries in question.

Yet the model for engaging impasse holds promise for the future for both women religious and the officials and institutions with whom they seek to work. With cracks in the closely guarded façade of power becoming evident each day, perhaps the time has come for those who adhere to a patriarchal system of power to finally have their long awaited renewal. If we pay attention to the "sign of the times" as called for by the Second Vatican Council and by Pope Francis, the need for change is clear. If these officials hold the core of Christianity to be true, as they claim, they too can be moved to engage impasse by allowing the Spirit to discover their fears and anguish, their part in the conflicts, and hopefully, a way forward that respects all participants, male and female, in this work of God. As the original group of women who pioneered this model of engagement tell us, we can move to "new places" that encompass "a Church that includes

both genders in significant decision-making processes; ethics that are shaped by the experience of all people; a language of worship and doctrine that leaves no one out; an array of images of God; and a Church that welcomes fully the gifts and talents of both women and men.”¹⁵³

Conclusion

As we come to the conclusion of this very brief look at the incredibly complex process of renewal for women religious in the United States, the words from Jessica Power’s poem strike a deep chord: “This is a beautiful time, this last age, the age of the Holy Spirit.”¹⁵⁴ What age does the deep spiritual renewal that has come from a call heard over fifty years ago in Rome hold for us? How is the model for engaging the very tensions and institutions that challenge this renewal to be embraced in these times of polarity? Can we imagine a church that honors all gifts and speaks truth and freedom to power? If we listen to the prophetic voices of these religious women-- who ask us to know them not by their actions, but by the very way they live-- can we see a way forward? As they live out the Gospel message of Jesus, they show us how to grow in freedom to love and freedom to be for God. This spiritual freedom has come at a cost, but one that has forged a spirituality that goes beyond the surface to a deep awareness of who they are for, and why they remain in this life. As I honor the work that has been done by

¹⁵³ McCarthy, Nolan, and Zollman, “Becoming The Change We Want to See,” 63.

¹⁵⁴ Jessica Powers, *The Selected Poetry of Jessica Powers*, eds. Regina Siegfried, ACS, and Robert F. Morneau (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1999), 27.

these vowed religious women, I have great hope for what is to come. These beautiful words from Jessica Powers, a Carmelite sister, remind us that,

Acres we are to be gathered for God: He would pour
out His measureless morning
upon divinized lands, bought by blood, to their
Purchaser given.
Oh, hear Him within you speaking this infinite love,
moving like some divine and audible leaven,
lifting the sky of the soul with expansions of light,
shaping new heights and new depths,
and, at your stir of assent,
spreading the mountains with flame, filling the
hollows with heaven.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

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