

Religious Life and Vatican II

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Introduction

The topic assigned to me is the re-evaluation of religious life in the light of the Conciliar decrees. I shall first list the decrees in question, then point out some areas of re-evaluation.

Of the decrees so far published, Chapter VI of the *Constitution on the Church* is the most important for our consideration. It originated in discussions on the states of perfection in the Church. The Council Fathers found the categories of states of perfection unacceptable and the doctrine of holiness in the Church was rewritten in terms of the universal call to Christian perfection. But neither was this unilateral consideration enough. After 250 interventions that ran to 1,000 pages, the Council accepted two chapters on the matter. One was Chapter V on Christian holiness as the vocation of every member in the Church; the other, Chapter VI on religious life. Chapter V is a magnificent statement of the basic elements of Christian holiness. Holiness is the same for all, founded on hearing and keeping the Word of God, expressing itself in the Sacraments and prayer, self-denial and brotherly concern; Chapter VI shows how the vows deepen this Baptismal commitment. Religious life is thus presented in the Council dogmatically rather than canonically. The category "state of perfection" is by-passed and the emphasis shifted from the juridic to the vital reality of grace and charity.

Is the Council's procedure here a downgrading of religious life? I do not think so; it is merely a different way of speaking and a shift of emphasis. First, a different way of speaking. It is a truism that today the

subjective, the personal, the experienced are synonymous with the real. For this reason objective categories as such which are abstract and theoretic seem to be unreal and irrelevant. Just as doctors say there are no sicknesses, only sick people, so there is no perfection or state of perfection, only people who are more or less perfect. Perfection is a subjective matter, *your* answer to *your* call. For this reason some authors refuse to speak about objective states of perfection because the only norm is the particular vocation. The council has spoken along this line. It does not deny, it prescind. from the scholastic doctrine of states of perfection. Secondly, there is a change of emphasis in the council's attitude. The *Constitution*, while not lyrical, is positive in its praise of religious life and uses adverbs like *pressius* (42;44) and *singulariter* (42;43) to characterize the imitation of Christ and way of perfection in religious life.

To remove any doubt in the matter, Pope Paul VI reasserted in strong terms the intrinsic superiority of religious life in his allocution to the capitulars of five or six orders on May 24, 1964. We consider this document a second important source for our topic. It is not strictly a conciliar document, but like the Pope's *Ecclesiam suam* in reference to the *Constitution on the Church*, this allocution actually interprets the Council's words about religious life.

We await what could be the most important document for our purpose, the schema on religious renewal, which remains to be approved and published in the Council. This schema is important even in its present unapproved forms. The last available revision (1964) is entitled "Renewal Adapted to Religious Life," (*De accommodata*

renovazione vitae religiosa.) Originally it was called “The State of Acquiring Perfection,” (1962), then simply “Religious” (1963), and in the last session it received its present designation. The document has shrunk from an original 130 pages in 1962 to four pages in 1964. It has been totally rewritten at least twice by the conciliar committee and was returned to committee last October for a final revision. What will come out of the final session is anybody’s guess, but presumably it will follow the lines of the 1964 version. This formulation was general enough, too general according to many, especially in its failure to set up machinery to apply the norms it laid down for renewal. But it did sum up many of the principles of adaptation discussed in the international congress of religious in 1950 and in subsequent national conferences.

Other decrees of Vatican II already published have relevance for the re-evaluation of religious life according to their subject matter. The *Constitution on the Liturgy* is supremely important. So is the decree on ecumenism. It is a sad fact that orders have not distinguished themselves as communities in leadership or even participation in the biblical, liturgical, social and ecumenical movements in the Church today. Council Fathers like Cardinal Doepfner of Munich have complained that the religious orders have been slow in applying themselves to these movements. Renewal is a look into the past, to one’s origins, it is true, but it is also a listening to the Holy Spirit in the present moment of salvation history. For a religious community to neglect the decree on the liturgy and its biblical orientations would be a capital sin. Father Tavard argues convincingly that a renewal in the liturgy would bring a renewal of religious life and the solution of many of the tensions and ills afflicting religious life today. Both liturgy and religious life are anticipated celebrations of the final eschatological state of the Church in signs.

This completes the survey of the documents. What do they tell us of the mind of the Church on religious life today? We single out four main areas for comment: concept of religious life itself, community life, the vows and the apostolate.

Religious Life

The Council defines religious life in the *Constitution on the Church* as a service, a witness and an apostolate. While it sees this form of life as total consecration to God, the perspective is the salvific mission of the Church rather than exclusively personal sanctification. The Council thus gets away from the concept of individualistic striving after perfection. Religious life is for the whole Mystical Body. It is a charism, a spiritual gift, arising in the Church from below, but regulated from above. While religious life does not pertain to the hierarchical structure of the Church, it is essential to the Church, because it is the expression of the pure faith and charity of the Church in their transcendent reality. Religious life thus pertains to the order of holiness received and lived; however active and apostolic it seems it is not part of the hierarchical function of teaching, ruling and sanctifying.

Here we touch on something new: religious are no longer a special class in the Church, because there are only two classes, clergy and laity. The *Code of Canon Law* has a triple division of clergy, religious and laity; the *Constitution* rejects this division and makes the religious vocation a personal and social expression of sanctity in the Mystical Body. The vocation of religious is to be holy, to mirror the life of Christ. Each order represents different aspects, some active, some contemplative. So in the words of the Council the orders represent “Christ contemplating on the mountain, announcing the kingdom of God to the crowds, healing the sick and the maimed, converting sinners to the better life, blessing children, helping all.” (n. 46). As

witness, therefore, all religious life, contemplative as well as active, is intrinsically apostolic. The schema on renewal has stressed this point. Unfortunately the schema does not define active and contemplative life, nor does it distinguish active religious priests from secular priests. This leaves open a host of questions like the role of monasticism in our world, the relationship between priesthood and religious life in clerical institutes, and the nature of active spirituality.

Both the schema and Pope Paul VI's allocution make it clear that religious life is an eschatological state, a life of charity and adoration based on the rejection of the worldly goods of property family, and self-determination. The priesthood, on the other hand, is a functional ministry, ordered to constituting and building up the Body of Christ, especially through the bread of the Eucharist and the word of God. Religious life and priesthood, therefore, are different orders of reality. They can be united in the same persons precisely because they are different formalities; but by the same token their presence together creates some tensions in the religious priest.

None of this is very new to anyone who is familiar with the modern theology of religious life. For a number of years the better writers have been presenting religious life in a doctrinal and historical perspective that is theological rather than canonical. Religious life has been conceived in terms of the great evangelical truths of Christian life. We have learned not to think of the vows in a negative fashion, with no relation to faith and charity. The theological virtues are the reason for the counsels. The affirmations of the Council approve this way of thinking and prevent our mistaking the accidental for the essential in religious life. This point of view also keeps us from looking down on other forms of Christian perfection, like that of the secular priest or the layman in the world. The secular

priest's way is not a second-rate way to God, nor is religious life the only way to perfection.

Community Life

Perhaps the single most discussed point about religious life today is community life. Renewal is a return from this point of view. Religious life must see itself as the "apostolic life" wherein "with one heart and one soul... they had all things in common." (Acts 4: 32). *The Acts of the Apostles* describe this apostolic life which harkens back to the life of the Apostles with the Lord in the Gospels. The primitive Church endeavored to reproduce the evangelical life. Possessing things in common was a mere sign of spiritual union with one another. The essence of apostolic life was communal charity. Community life, therefore, is the very heart of religious life. But how can we achieve a sense of community in the face of the instability, the mobility and the enormous demands made on religious in the active life today? The answer seems to be the cultivation of community spirit (*fraterna associatio* n. 43). Religious life is not exclusively a withdrawal, much less a refusal of the world; it is a life of perfect charity, fraternal charity among Christians subject to their Lord. Community cannot mean only that everyone is doing the same thing at the same time. This uniformity is often impossible. But in the absence of material conformity and in the hectic hyperactive lives of most modern religious, other means must compensate for developing the essential brotherly union. Such means today are dialogue, concern and interest in one's brothers, and group meetings which would be the modern equivalent of the *collationes* of the Desert Fathers.

The Vows

Vatican II repeats the classical doctrine that the vows remove obstacles to Christian perfection. Obedience, for example, according to the 1964 schema and in words that repeat

Paul VI's allocation of May 24, 1965, is a "holocaust of one's will." But Vatican II is also aware of the hazards of the vows, the danger that they might stunt a man's emotional and even spiritual growth. To achieve spiritual freedom rather than dehumanize a man, the living of the vows must be authentic. Poverty, for example, must be real and not merely juridic. It is a declaration of freedom from material dependency and comforts and not the legal fiction of getting permission for one's self-indulgence. Poverty must be social as well as private and personal. Obedience must not be unthinking, as if there were a certain magic in doing another's will. Obedience is not as excuse for dependency, for infantile thinking that rejects responsibility. Superiors especially are charged by obedience to find the good and true, and lead in such ways that do not infringe against the personal responsibility, the dignity, and the liberty of their subjects. Chastity involves a loving more, not a loving less, in regard to one's fellow men. Concretely there are many problems here, which the general statements of the *Constitution* or the schema do not resolve, but at least some direction is given for the re-thinking of the evangelical counsels today.

The Apostolate

The final area touched on by the Council is the apostolate of religious life. The Council views religious life entirely from this perspective and defines religious life as a special service that religious life gives to God and one's fellow men in the Mystical Body. This service is primarily witness. Even its external works witness the faith and love of Christ. But the external tasks too are important in themselves. Pius XII once remarked that the Church could not fulfill its mission without the work of religious. But concretely, what are the tasks of religious orders? The answer is the works the communities were founded to

perform. Each community must remain faithful to the charism of its origin.

This brings up two problems much discussed outside the Council and so far not proposed officially. The first concerns the question of active spirituality. The schema on the priesthood finds the sanctification of priests in their apostolic work. Is this true of Religious also? Religious want more unity in their lives. Council speakers, including Cardinal Spellman, cautioned against over-emphasizing activity at the expense of the contemplative life. Admittedly there is always the danger of activism, but many observe as well as religious today hope that a better formula to relate prayer and action in their lives will be found than the old dichotomies. Such a formula, it seems, must come from a positive interpretation of the role of action.

The second problem concerns the juridic status of religious in the diocese. While there has been some criticism of the exemption of religious orders and even the independence in the diocese of nonexempt pontifical institutes, there seems to be little likelihood that religious will lose their relative independence in the diocese. The legitimacy of this juridic status is ably defended by experts on the ground of the charismatic nature of religious life. Religious life originates in the charism of a founder and the Church owes it to itself to foster and protect and preserve that charism. This can best be done by leaving the religious community to certain independence in the Church.

Conclusion

By way of summary, we might say that the trends of thinking in and after Vatican II are toward greater realism, toward the social dimension, and toward decentralization. The first quality, realism, is exemplified in the rejection of the concept of the states of perfection. The ecclesial definition of religious life, which underlines the apostolic and caritative function of religious life in the

Body of Christ and veers away from the purely private and ascetical, exemplifies the social preoccupation. Decentralization, which is one of the most universal trends of Vatican II, finds expression in suggestions that new forms of religious life be developed in

emerging countries and the care that individual ways be preserved. We religious are grateful to Vatican II for offering guidelines on the actual role of religious life in the Mystical Body today.