

Religious Life in Light of Vatican II

On October 28, 1965, the *Decree on Adaptation and Renewal of Religious Life* was promulgated by the Second Vatican Council. This decree had undergone a thorough overhauling in the four years of the Council's history. Its roots were in the International Congress on States of Perfection in 1950 and numerous national conferences on religious adaptation. The original schema, a long, juridical document of some hundred pages, was prepared in 1962 under the title, "The States of Acquiring Perfection in the Church."

The legalistic tone of this document put it out of date before it reached the Council floor. Actually it was not discussed in the Council itself until the third session and after three wholesale revisions of the text. The schema was first cut down to a third its original size, then reduced to nineteen propositions under the title *De accommodata renovatione vitae religiosae*, the present title of the decree. A great deal of dissatisfaction and criticism greeted the telescoped version—some 10,000 "modi" were said to have been submitted, not all of them, of course, different. The corrections and additions considerably expanded the text that was presented and approved in the final session of the Council. It contains twenty-five paragraphs, many of which have sub-headings, so that the document is more than a few resolutions though still less than a full treatise. It lays down guidelines and general norms only. It is neither the *magna carta* hoped for by the *avant-garde* nor a throwback to pre-conciliar thinking. One could characterize the decree as basically conservative, balanced, almost dialectical in its effort to assert both sides of each question. But it is positive and practical and breathes the spirit of Vatican II.

The *Decree* applies and complements the perspective on holiness (ch. 5) and

religious life (ch. 6) of the *Constitution on the Church*. Together the *Constitution* and the *Decree* present the latest and fullest authoritative statement from the Church on religious spirituality. The present article attempts to sketch out three basic characteristics of the conciliar understanding of the religious vocation. The three characteristics are (1) the authentic, (2) the evangelical, and (3) the ecclesial quality of post-conciliar spirituality for religious.

Authentic

The *Constitution* defines the place of religious in the Church by canceling their intermediate status between clergy and laity and returning them to the People of God. Religious as *individuals* belong to one or other of the two divinely established categories in the Church: they are priests, or they are laymen. But as *religious* they are simply Christians dedicated to live in a special way the full implications of their Faith. Too long has their canonical status as a class apart beclouded their theological role as simple Christians in the Mystical Body.

The Council enhanced the bishop's role, spoke warmly of the priest, especially the diocesan priest, and pointed up the lay vocation. In emphasizing the universal call to holiness and situating religious as one group among many called to perfection in the Church did it wish to downgrade religious? The answer is "no." The Council did not call into question the superiority of their way to holiness, much less assert that religious life should cede to the secular priesthood and lay life in the world as the preferred way to God in our age of Christian secularity. The Council wished only to place religious accurately in the Church and to underline the fact that with

regard to holiness who you are is more important than what you are in the Church.

The viewpoint of Vatican II is that religious life is not an office, or a function, or a particular work in the Church. It is a state of being, a state of grace that pertains to the order of life and holiness. Religious are servants of the Church, but their specific role is not to be teachers or nurses or administrators. Their proper contribution is to be holy members, holy workers, witnesses to the one calling of all in Christ Jesus. This vocation to holiness in no way short-circuits the good works, any more than the call to holiness in marriage prevents the rearing of children. The religious vocation calls religious to work in the Church, but under the precise formality of manifesting the holiness of the Church in that work. Religious are to provide at once a ministry and a witness to the sanctity of the Mystical Body.

This idea used to be expressed in terms of the “state of perfection” and “striving after perfection.” Vatican II reaffirms this purpose of religious life but it avoids the old terms. Why? Because it wished to stay on the level of the real and the authentic, and it refused to confuse what *might be* or *should be* with what is. The “state of perfection” is too much like a legal fiction, a status symbol; “striving after perfection” has too often become a do-it-yourself voluntarism. Holiness as the Council sees it is grace and gift from above; it is union with Christ and life in the Spirit. Works are “fruits of grace” which manifest this new life. All Christians are called to the fullness of this life and to its particular expressions according to their own state. Why, then, should we limit the state of perfection?

“Striving after perfection” seems to imply a conquering of a goal and connotes self-mastery rather than the heart of the matter, which is outgoing love and service to God and neighbor. The phrase seems to place personal growth over against the progress of the Church and the world and helps to create

dichotomies between spiritual life and apostolate. All too easily these concepts put in the shadow our redemption in Christ and our sanctification in the Holy Spirit. They nurture a constricting individualism, will-power religion, and *self*-sanctification.

The Council, therefore, proceeded on a new tack. In the *Constitution* it rejected the canonical formulations and rewrote the doctrine in two chapters on Evangelical Christian holiness. Chapter V treats magnificently the universal call and way of Christian holiness. Holiness is the same for all, founded on hearing and keeping the Word of God; it is centered in the liturgy, especially the Eucharist, and it is prepared for by prayer, self-denial, and fraternal charity. From man’s point of view holiness is loving faith and hopeful love. Chapter VI shows how the religious vows deepen this commitment which is initiated in baptism. Religious life is thus presented in its general lines, vitally, in terms of grace and charity, rather than juridically, according to a special niche in the organization of the Church.

Religious are thus rescued from the rarefied “state of perfection” and returned to the bosom of the redeemed *laos*. Religious should be recognizable among the people of God, not because they have a “holy rule” but because they are rooted in Christ and possess the Spirit. Their witness is “outstanding” because their love is outstanding, because they live the Paschal Mystery of death to sin and life to God to the full. Theoretically their way remains especially adapted to sanctity. The Council does not deny the scholastic doctrine of states of perfection. It just bypasses it in favor of something more personal and subjective. It approves the way of the vows and common life, though it gives religious life no edge, since it is only one way. Religious life has in fact its own built-in hazards, which the Council recognizes. But the real reason for the Council’s position is the truth that all holiness is a personal response to a personal

call from God. There are many calls, many mansions, and, practically speaking, religious life is only as good as it is lived.

Evangelical

This fresh viewpoint on religious life is biblical and evangelical. The *Decree* sees renewal and adaptation of religious life as a return to beginnings, a going back to the Gospel and the original charism of the Founder. Adaptation takes account of the present too, but its main task is to revitalize the forms and structures with the Gospel spirit. The accretions of time in observances and apostolates that do not correspond to the pure Gospel and modern conditions must be sloughed off. Basic sources of spiritual life—prayer, the Bible, the liturgy, the common life of love and service—are listed in both the *Constitution* (n. 42) and the *Decree* (n. 6) as the blueprint of personal renewal. Goals of various institutes are clarified and described in concrete terms, without appeal to hallowed but confusing abstractions like “active” and “contemplative life” or “mixed orders.” The division of institutes presented (nn.7-11) will help solve more than one identity crisis, because of the clarification of goals for different religious communities and the suggestion of different structurings of Christian life. The *Decree* justifies not only the purely contemplative life, but also an apostolic spirituality which is built around the works of the external apostolate. The later *Decree on the Ministry and the Life of the Priest* of December 7, 1965, develops a “pastoral spirituality,” structured around preaching, sacramental administration, and other priestly duties. In the *Decree on Religious*, there are indications for a similar “active spirituality” for those religious whose apostolate is oriented to works and whose charity is to find its preferred expression in “apostolic love” (n. 8).

The evangelical counsels are described as genuine renunciations. Poverty, for

example, must be real poverty for the individual as well as the community, and not a legalistic getting permission for self-indulgences. Chastity is a renunciation of the heart, a bypassing of possessing and being possessed by another human being in marriage and the family. Obedience is a service on the part of superior and subject; both parties must take responsibility for decisions; for both obedience is a “holocaust of one’s will” (n. 14), which faith and not organizational efficiency justifies.

Just as all holiness promotes “a more human manner of living in this earthly society” (*Constitution*, n. 39), so authentic renunciations do not de-humanize or lessen one’s freedom or cripple natural development. Somewhere along the line we have disincarnated evangelical values and therefore distorted them. Poverty becomes apathy, chastity coldness and aloofness, obedience dependency and irresponsibility. But the Gospel does not know our dichotomies between the spiritual and the human, between love of God and honest affection for the neighbor, between supernatural growth and human progress. The *Decree* tries to heal the breach between nature and grace, culture and sanctity, holiness and maturity. Adaptation, for example, is to take psychic as well as physical needs into account. Emotional maturity and sound understanding are presupposed for a successful chastity; so also is a “true brotherly love in the common life of the community” (n. 12). Religious life is not even minimally Christian if it is not a community of love and adoration, an ikon of the Mystical Body (n. 14).

Community life is indeed the key-point of renewal. Religious life is the continuation of the “apostolic life” described in the Acts of the Apostles, in which the Jerusalem Church “with one heart and soul... had all things in common” (Acts 4:32). The “one heart and soul” is the essence; the “all things in common” is the sign, The first Christians

could “continue with one accord in the temple and break bread in their houses” (Acts 2:46), because they were a brotherhood under the Lord. The essence of apostolic life was adoration and charity, and these remain the essential values of religious life today; community of life and property are only its signs.

But how can we achieve community in our alienated world? How can a sense of community be achieved in the face of the instability, the mobility, and the enormous demands made on active religious? The answer developed in the *Decree* is fraternal charity. This is no easy solution, but the only adequate one. Community spirit must be fostered through the daily celebration of the Eucharist and the asceticism of brotherly love. Community in the apostolate today often cannot mean 100 per cent uniformity, with everyone doing the same thing at the same time. But in the absence of material conformity a deeper spiritual union must compensate for the separation, the pressures, the hyper-activity. There must be more mutual respect, familial joy, fraternal sharing of one another’s burdens, as well as better communication.

Ecclesial

Religious life is in and for the Church. It is not a private relationship between God and the individual soul, a “Jesus and me” piety; nor is each institute a church within the Church. Religious communities owe their existence to the Church and are at the service of the Church. They are not private operators, bent on personal business that is independent of the local bishop and the universal Church. For example, religious should use their every forum to promote the biblical, liturgical, ecumenical, and social apostolates emphasized by Vatican II and the Holy Spirit. This does not mean that they give up their present tasks, but only that they approach them with the Spirit moving in the Church since the Council.

By fulfilling their tasks they are serving the Church in the best possible way, because they are thereby reflecting their dimension of Christ. Religious are so many fraternal associations mirroring “Christ in contemplation on the mountain, in his proclamation of the kingdom of God to the multitudes, in his healing of the sick and the maimed, in his work of converting sinners to a better life, in his solicitude for youth” (n. 46).

Pius XII once remarked that without religious the Church could never fulfill its responsibilities in the world; it could not staff its schools, man its hospitals, conduct its spiritual centers. But the specific contribution of religious, Vatican II has taught us, is not the social apostolate as such. Even if laymen could be found who would be willing and able to take care of all the Church’s charitable institutions, the Church would still need religious to witness to the other-worldly holiness of the Mystical Body. It would still need men and women whose lives would publicly and unambiguously testify that the center and goal and prize of life lies in the next world. The teaching, nursing, and social work of religious find approval and appreciation in the city of man and in the eyes of men. Even apart from faith these works have their own value; under faith they witness to the assumption and consecration of human values for the sake of the kingdom. But the renouncement of religious through the three vows and the life of service thereby expressed make no sense except in faith, except in view of values beyond this world. This eschatological witness, as well as the incarnational witness of good works, is the special witness of religious in the Church. Their contribution is the holiness that inspires the good works and is manifested in them.

The whole religious vocation, according to the *Decree*, lies in being religious. Good works are to be seen in this light. They build a better world, but they also testify to a world greater than this one. And

the latter goal takes precedence over the former. Religious life is one; it is a life hidden with God in Christ, but it manifests itself in apostolic love as well as prayerful silence. Apostolic works, says the *Decree*, are as much a part of religious life as prayers. Active religious are followers of Christ by being dynamic doers-of-the-Word in imitation of their Master. But all religious fulfill their whole vocation by being religious, by responding joyfully and generously to each moment's call from God, whether that call is

to silent communion in the cloister, to the service of God in the liturgy, or to an apostolate in the classroom or the inner city. In the great preoccupation at the present moment with the externals of the sacrifice of the Mass, the exact relationship between the externals and the participation of the faithful in the offering of the Mass is sometimes obscured. This is especially true with regard to the offertory and the offertory procession.