

The Religious Woman, God, and the World

There is no question but that religious life today is going through a period of transition. We may well ask: How is the process faring? It is difficult to say. Communities are at different stages of renovation, and evaluations vary. Many, however, sense something of an impasse at the present moment. There have been many changes in religious life, but where is it all going? Some think the changes are destroying religious life, others that there has been no real change at all. Bells have been dropped, horaria humanized, habits altered, even put aside in favor of secular dress. But has radical renewal taken place? Are religious vibrant, joyful, Easter people, loving communities of dedicated Christians? Or is it another case of the French proverb: "The more the changes, the more things are like themselves"?

The changes so far have had to do mostly with structures. But can religious life be renewed from the outside in? Or must we not follow the Gospel principle of *metanoia*, which is conversion from the inside out? The answer is that we need both a new heart and spirit, "interior renewal," as well as the new structures that are gradually and sometimes painfully being worked out in contemporary religious life. The structures are the vehicle and incarnation of the spirit. Some of them are peripheral, others are creating new life-styles in community and in the apostolate, not only in government, the exercise of authority and obedience, forms of poverty and the common life, but in the most basic values of religious life, which are prayer and community. For a New Pentecost in religious life we need a revitalized faith, hope, and charity and structural reforms imaginative and creative enough to express this new life in the culture of the 1970's.

It is not enough, therefore, to humanize, socialize and secularize the

religious life. These things we must do to be part of our times. So we are increasing the opportunities for individuals to grow as authentic persons; we are changing patterns of common observance, so that communities can be communions of friendship and love; we are reforming our apostolates, so that the works are worth doing, real contributions to building up the new earth. But we must do all this in such a way that it is God's work as well as our own.

Replacing the obsolete and the obsolescent, getting rid of irrelevancies and hang-ups from the past, making religious life more human, and therefore, more Christian, bringing convent life into tune with the space age — all that is part of renewal, with a proviso. The proviso is that the reforms are the work of the Holy Spirit. This is not pietism. It is Gamaliel's principle: "If this plan or work is of men, it will be overthrown; but if it is of God, it will last" (cf *Acts* 5: 38-39).

External reforms without the new spirit do not renovate the Church or religious life. Here is a test case. What do you think of these words that appeared recently in a column in the Catholic Press: "Every priest who marries without 'permission' represents a victory for the reform movement. Every seminarian who leaves the seminary in protest against an antiquated clerical life represents a reform triumph." At best, statements like this are equivocal. Opting out may be the answer in given cases, but only if "it seem good to the Holy Spirit and to us" (cf. *Acts* 15: 28), only if a formed Christian conscience dictates this extreme remedy. Otherwise we are truly substituting man-made religion for divinely guided faith. The presumption is against "copping out," as Bishop Butler of England stated eloquently in a recent interview. He urged Catholics to stay in the structures and work for renewal from within with courage

and patience and co-responsibility. My point here, however, is not to take a stand against protest or revolt, but to insist that every decision to make changes, especially disruptive ones, must be carefully measured by a higher law and validated in the Holy Spirit. We need discernment of spirits today as never before in the past, for without the Holy Spirit there is no true reform in the Church.

This reflection may sound namby-pamby, as if to take the renewal out of our own hands and to return us to the unquestioning, often naive, and sometimes even magical thinking of pre-Vatican II days. The fact is that renewal is both spiritual and juridical, divine and human. Without the Spirit external changes will be as dead a letter as the evils the reforms are supposed to correct. Spiritual renewal means renewal that is Spirited, Holy-Spirited, changes and reforms that are enlivened and directed by the Holy Spirit. Unless the Holy Spirit re-creates, re-fashions and re-forms both the people and their institutions, our efforts at *aggiornamento* will be not only ineffectual but destructive.

At the end of the Uppsala World Council of Churches meetings (1968), the following evaluation was made by one of the youth representatives: "Renewal," he wrote, "will not come from youth; it can only come from the living God. A new encounter with the living God is a desperate need for all within the Church, for youth as much as for the old." We say with equal conviction: religious renewal will not come from religious; it can only come from the living God.

Changes in structure without change of heart are the adaptations without renewal of which *Perfectae Caritatis* states: "... even the most desirable changes made on behalf of contemporary needs will fail of their purpose unless a renewal of Spirit gives life to them." (2,e) Adjustments without renewal are non-salvific. Interior renewal on the other hand, is always salvific. Inevitably it puts new life into dead bones of archaic institutions and creates

new forms. A renewed spirit is the new wine of the Gospels that bursts through the worn-out wineskins of the old structures and demands new skins to keep it.

We cannot use the Holy Spirit's role as an excuse for inaction, for do-nothingism. We can be sympathetic with those who are threatened by the erosion of religious practices and structures that served so well even in the recent past. But let the dead bury their dead. The living must move forward, eyes straight ahead, without regrets, even if there is a touch of sadness for what must pass. New ways of living and doing must incarnate the ancient values of religious life in our contemporary culture. New forms will rise out of the ashes of the old, and our only concern must be to search out the values and their appropriate manifestations for our time. This is to listen to the Spirit. He speaks, not in voices from heaven, but in human ideals and secular hopes. These are today's signs of the times.

There is no dichotomy, then, between spiritual renewal and exterior changes. There is no room for two camps among us, one of "spiritualists," the other "structuralists." We must not fall into the error of pushing the reform of structures to the neglect of renewal of spirit, as if the spirit is a private affair and really has nothing to do with practical matters. At the same time we cannot promote renewal of spirit in a vacuum, as if a good retreat would solve the ills which assail religious life today. Spirit and structures go hand in hand; they rise and fall together. They do not represent two approaches to the same one goal; they are one approach, or else no approach at all. They are not separate compartments, but like soul and body, they interpenetrate each other. One is interior to the other. Neither stands alone. While we can conceive our task as beginning with the spirit, we must remember that the spirit cannot survive among men if it is not quickly incarnated in tangible forms and deeds. We can live with abuses in a state of contradiction

for a while, but only for a while. Either the spirit or the contradiction will give way.

Some documents of Vatican II tend to highlight the distinctions and antitheses in Christian life rather than its unity. The antitheses in question correspond roughly to spirit and structures, to the divine and the human elements in Christianity. According to the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, for example, the Church is

...both human and divine, visible and yet invisibly endowed, eager to act and yet devoted to contemplation, present in the world and yet not at home in it. She is all these things in such a way that in her the human is directed and subordinated to the divine, the visible likewise to the invisible, action to contemplation, and this present world to that city yet to come ... [n. 2, pp. 137-138 in *The Documents of Vatican II*].

Perfectae caritatis describes religious life in a series of contrasting doublets that play on its different aspects. Generally the dialectic is being and doing. Thus religious life is both a state of being and a function, a witness and a mission; it is a consecration to God and service to men, at once contemplative and apostolic. These elements describe two movements, one vertical, moving upward toward God, the other horizontal, moving outward toward men. The person who stands at the intersection of these pulls is bound to experience the tension between heaven and earth.

These clear distinctions underline the double vocation of the Christian and the religious. He must love God and he must love his neighbor. United to God in spirit, he carries out in the structures and patterns of daily existence the demands of faith, hope, and charity. On the basis of the double movement we can develop a valid philosophy of religious life. The religious woman stands at the crossroads, looking up to God and looking out into the world. Her life is a search for union with God and for community with her fellowmen. Prayer is her vertical occupation, fraternal charity and the

apostolate the horizontal obligation. There is no danger of confusing these two. God is not people, nor are people God. Love of God is not love of neighbor, nor is prayer identified with building community or promoting human values. Life is a rhythmic movement from one to the other of these two occupations: now one prays, now he works, now he prays again. Priority is given to prayer; community is the effect of prayer, and structures grow out of union with God.

This summary, brief and partial as it is, seems to characterize the "old spirituality." The old spirituality nourished countless souls in the past, and still has much to recommend it. It is valid. But is it viable today? Does it not run counter to contemporary religious culture? Today's generation is impatient with distinctions that separate instead of unifying human life. Life is experienced today as moving in one direction, at once forward and toward God. Thus the religious woman of today would see herself as a person living in community, and her whole life, this life with others in the world, is God-oriented. She seeks a different image or diagram to illustrate her relationships with God and the world.

One possible image is three concentric circles. The center circle is Christ, the sacrament and revelation of the Father. The middle circle represents the world; it stands for people, the cosmos, for individuals and communities, for the "you's" in my life. The outer circle is the religious woman herself, the person, the "I." The rings are not standing still; they vibrate into each other, now from the center outwards, now from without to within. They interpenetrate one another. The two outer rings represent the human side, the structures of religious life. The center ring is the spirit. Christian life is a constant interaction between the center and the two outside rings, between spirit and structures. The diagram shows that life with each other and with Christ is one.

A man's life is lived in the outer rings, but with power from the center. He does not

live in isolation on the outer ring, at least if he has a human existence. He is defined as a person by the persons in his life. "You" make me what I am; you give me meaning and value, because I make a difference to you. Without you I cannot be; but in communion with you I grow, as indeed do you in our mutual love. Christ enters my life through you. He enters these outer rings as the ultimate You in our life, the One who gives me and you ultimate meaning. He calls us together in Himself; He speaks to us in the I-You condition of human existence. I become a Christian when I recognize Him as the center of my life.

I recognize the *Christus praesens* in faith. He is the Risen Lord, who speaks to me through His Spirit, especially in the people in my life. This means that He speaks to me in the cosmos, in history, as well as in Word and Sacrament. Contemporary theology locates Christ where he promised to be: with men, where two or three are gathered in His name, where the least of His brethren stand in need, where love and charity prevail, wherever there is a good Samaritan or an enemy.

My response is faith. It is the surrender of my life to Christ. Hence it is conversion, *metanoia*; it is also prayer, encounter in Christ with the living God. It is also spiritual renewal, because as Urs von Balthasar has pointed out, renewal is return to the center.

In short, God comes to us through each other and we go to Him through each other. Thus in our response, there are not two movements, one upward, one outward; there is one movement and it involves both God and man at once. This is to say that prayer and community are not disparate activities as they seemed to be in the double movement diagram. Prayer continues to be the search for God, tuning in to Christ. But in this perspective we shall tend to think of Him less apart, in the abstract, in heaven or in the recesses of one's soul, and more as He is one with His brothers and reveals Himself through their humanity and their love. Prayer takes the

form of listening, listening to the Other as He is refracted through others. Prayer will continue to include reflective acts in silence; it will celebrate privately and publicly the presence of the Lord in the community. But it can also be mixed up with our interpersonal relationships. Perhaps it would be more heroic if our project were to isolate the Lord and see Him in His transcendent reality, as some of the great saints of the past seemed to do. But who can presume to be called to the heroic? It is significant that President Nixon in his inaugural address emphasized the little virtues, such as lowering our voices and listening to each other. Then he characterized this program in this way:

I do not offer a life of uninspiring ease.

I do not call for a life of grim sacrifice.

I ask you to join in a high adventure — one as rich as

humanity itself, exciting as the times we live in.

This is the kind of spirituality we are called to practice today. The Holy Spirit has democratized the presence of Christ in our time. Christ speaks to us through each other, across the insights, the aspirations, the problems and preoccupations of man with his fellow man. Today more than ever before, Dostoyevsky's words are true: He who desires to see the living God face-to-face should not seek Him in the empty firmament of his mind, but in human love.

Prayer remains the center of Christian life. But prayer today will take on a different phenomenology. For example, it will more obviously involve the you's in my life. This is because Christ comes to me as I am, namely, not a solitary individual, but a communion, an I-You community.

The response which is prayer remains a personal response to Christ. He will be recognized as a "You" in communion as He was at Emmaus. Thus the word of God addressed to a man is at once a call to be himself, a call to enter into ever deeper communion with his neighbor and with his world, and a call to know and love Christ. It is

the call to life, to pass over out of the death of isolation, into communion with his fellowmen.

Prayer and communion are so intertwined that they can be separated only by a process of abstraction. The response of faith is the acceptance of God's love. The acceptance can be prayer in the traditional sense, whether of petition — asking to be loved as all our requests of others are — or of contemplation, enjoying what is. But if the response is true and not just mere talk, it is expressed equally well by expressing Christ's and the Father's love to others. My whole life is a response. Through Christ's love both you and I grow together in reconciliation, in community, and in the extension of community to those outside, which we call apostolate. My "Yes" to Christ is immediately and intrinsically a "Yes" to my brothers.

From this we begin to see that renewal of spirit and adaptation of structures are organically interdependent. Structures are the patterns which allow us to communicate with each other, which allow the grace of Christ to influence the community of mankind. They are contingent, indicated or counter-indicated according as they serve or hinder the love of Christ in us. We tend to think of structures only in terms of community life and the apostolate. But they are patterns for prayer as well. Some forms of prayer aid the response of faith, others have become irrelevant, insofar as they do not speak to the religious woman of today.

Prayer and community, i.e. communion, must be the values in our life: to appreciate these values anew is to renew ourselves. Prayer structures — "prayers" — are to be promoted which develop our union with Christ, our personal union with the person Christ. There is need for reflective prayer, for the articulation of our surrender to the Lord, for doxology. There is need for prayer together which both celebrates our call together in Christ and gathers us together

anew. As for community structures, whatever promotes sound relationships and adult communication, for example, freedom, responsibility, mutual acceptance, mutual support, must be built into the style of religious life of our times. The thesis of this paper is that explicit prayer is the implicit communion with our fellowmen, and the search for communion with each other is implicit prayer. The two supreme values of religious life prosper or weaken together.

The "old spirituality" has been criticized for being one-sidedly theocentric; the "new spirituality" is often accused of being excessively horizontal and secular. The problem of religious renewal is to unite these two approaches, to integrate person, community and God. It does not seem an exaggeration to say that the survival of religious life hangs in the balance. We must reassure ourselves and the young who come to us that religious life is worth it all. It is so, only if it effectively promises union with God and communion with our neighbor. If it does not deliver this genuine friendship with God and each other, it does not deserve to survive.

Let me close with a quotation from John Gardner. According to him institutions are caught today in the crossfire of "uncritical lovers" and "unloving critics." Uncritical lovers "smother their institutions in the embrace of death, loving their rigidities more than their promise, shielding them from life-giving criticism." These are believers in renewal of spirit who refuse to make the necessary changes. The "unloving critics" are the "critics without love," reformers who do not understand and love authentic religious life. They are "skilled in demolition but untutored in the arts by which human institutions are nurtured and strengthened and made to flourish." Let our presence here be our affirmation that we are "critical lovers" of the religious life to which God has called each one of us.