

## Spirituality of Religious According to Vatican II

Spiritual renewal, as both *Perfectae caritatis* and *Ecclesiae sanctae* point out, must precede and inspire adaptation. What are the guidelines for this spiritual renewal? What kind of spirituality should emerge among religious from the renewal? These are the questions of the present paper. I should like to describe the religious spirituality of Vatican II in terms of three essential characteristics—its evangelical, its human, and its ecclesial qualities.

### EVANGELICAL

Religious are Christians opting for a particular form of the total following of Jesus Christ. While Vatican II allowed them a special canonical status for purposes of organization (*Lumen gentium*, n. 45), it emphasized that their place in the People of God cuts across the categories of hierarchy and laity and is a cross-section of both priests and laymen. Religious do not exercise a special office or perform a function other than to express in an outstanding way the life and holiness of the Body of Christ (*ibid.*, n.43). Nothing is said of their constituting a “state of perfection”; they do not even have the exclusive prerogative of “striving after perfection.” These are conditions for all Christians. The technical phrases themselves belong to a medieval theological perspective, to theoretic and legal forms and structures that were bypassed at Vatican II. The Council approaches the questions of religious life in the broader contexts of the universal call to holiness and of concrete persons endeavoring to live out their way of life. The Council is not interested in abstractions.

The Gospel becomes more patently the “supreme law” and “fundamental norm.” (*Perf. caritatis*, n.2). Every custom and practice, every form and structure of

contemporary religious life is to be re-evaluated by Gospel standards. Each community attempts to recreate the experience of its founder, but the founder’s charism is always a Gospel value. The present task of renewal is to return to the Gospel as lived by the founder and to articulate that same Gospel in contemporary forms. This is both renewal and adaptation. The viable synthesis of the old and the new will be sign and proof of the Holy Spirit’s presence.

Religious communities are to be more obviously Christian communities, witnessing in a diaphanous way primary values like the beatitudes. They will thus become less identified with certain “religious” values like decorum or observance. Religious should be outstanding for their charity, even at the apparent—and it will only be an apparent—expense of dedication to the “holy rule.” Virtues rather than laws structure Christian life. Religious life like all Christian life is a moment to moment response to God, ruled by *kairos*, the moment of grace, rather than *chronos*, which is the horarium or the clock. There need be no contradiction here, but there will be tensions. There are different polarities in human existence. The good must be preserved in each complementary aspect, but the Christian value must stand out in a special way. So, conformity (not conformism or dependency) is a value; but the free and joyful response to God’s Word is a more central witness. Silence and solitude, two classic religious values with Gospel roots, can never be absolutes; they must leave room for the evangelical exigencies of involvement and care. The forms which express these values must be purified, i.e., re-ordered, so that the pure Gospel shines out.

Similarly the primary exercises of holiness in religious life will be those of the universal Church. The key documents of

Vatican II—*The Liturgy, The Church, The Church in the Modern World*—are more basic sources for religious spirituality than chapter 6 of *The Church* or the decree on “Adaptation”. Specifically religious decrees develop only the differences, not the basic content of Christian life. A daily spiritual program which would not be liturgically oriented and thoroughly biblical would be an anachronism in a religious community today. An example of this liturgical preoccupation is the recommendation of *Ecclesiae sanctae* of the Divine Office over the Little Office (n.20). So also common prayers in religious communities should be predominantly the liturgical ones; private prayers should be left to the private lives of the individual religious, at least as regards place but perhaps also as regards the actual time.

The Gospel spirit will help religious life rise above the painful mediocrity of which it is often accused. Religious life can be an excuse for mediocrity. Why are there so many good religious and so few saints? Why does growth seem to stop on a less than fully mature level? Too often religious exchange one set of human securities for another without that dedication to an absolute that is Christian sanctity.

Could one reason for this limitation be the fact that the patterns of activity among us are designed in too legalistic a fashion? Legislation has to do with the minimum. Anyone who measures his life by this standard is likely to achieve only limited growth. The Gospel spirit reminds us that the pharisaical fulfilling of the law is not enough. The spiritual life above all is a personal venture, the response to a personal call from God. And like all life it must rise above every particularity, even the legislated forms of sanctity. The Rule and Constitutions are not intended to protect us against the Holy Spirit. The Rule will help us come alive to the Holy Spirit, if it breathes an evangelical atmosphere.

## HUMAN

The human quality in Christian life is an all-pervading characteristic of the post-conciliar age of secularity. What is perfectly human is perfectly Christian. So *The Church in the Modern World* states that nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in the Christian’s heart today. The reason for this is simple. Spirituality begins and ends in God, but specifically it is the *human* response to the Holy Spirit, Who communicates with us through human words and actions. If it is truly human, our response is adult, this-worldly, and total.

First, it is adult. Religious life should be structured for adults, not minors. Thus rules should be made only as necessary for the common good. The common good, in turn, is that condition in which people can best be autonomous persons. The more responsibility, the more initiative left to the individual religious, the better. This is only to respect the freedom which Vatican II vindicated for all men in the *Decree on Religious Freedom*.

Some laws are necessary, in order to condition, support and protect the individual religious, both in the years of training and in life in community. Such laws, however, must respect human values and natural law. They must take into account the person and contribute to freedom. Mere legalities which serve to control all areas of an individual’s life are incursions into the private lives of religious. Sisters, for example, are members of political, civic, and educational communities besides their religious community, and they must live in these other structures as responsible adults. This approach to religious life indicates that only adults or near-adults should be accepted into religious life, a procedure that may be becoming something of a trend among women religious.

The this-worldly quality of post-Vatican II spirituality is summed up in the aphorism: “Stop the world, I want to get on.”

Certainly the incarnational condition of Christian life is one of the greatest insights of Vatican II. We cannot separate soul from body, the individual from the community, personal growth from building up the kingdom. Religious have often been attempting to live on a very abstract, other-worldly plane. They have downplayed the world, emphasized detachment and flight, and used the purity of their motivation as the only criterion for the value of their contribution to the Church and mankind. Vatican II tells religious to come down out of the clouds, to come down to earth and evaluate their life not only in terms of dedication but of human realities. Religious “leave the world” to follow Christ, but in varying proportions they remain firmly enmeshed in human endeavors and human tasks. Religious renounce the world in some special visible way (*Perf. caritatis*, n.5), i.e., they renounce given human values which structure a secular existence. So they forego marriage and family, private possessions, and a community of their own making. The profession of the vows constitutes them an eschatological community that finds its ultimate meaning and justification only in the principles of the faith. But this other-worldly orientation does not lessen their involvement in the world about them, in the world of science and technology, art and culture. This is to say that eschatological and incarnational aspects of Christian life are not mutually exclusive; they are different dimensions—the ultimate and proximate causes—of the same realities of daily existence.

Superiors do well today to give as much thought (or more) to sociological and psychological principles in the formation of the young as to theological truths. Theology gives ultimate answers but these ultimates must find expression in human forms. The good religious, as any good Christian, will be a good man. “The glory of God is the man fully alive,” said St. Irenaeus. Camus’ “What

interests me is becoming man” is only a variation on this theme. Vatican II assents to this authentic and realistic approach. While it no doubt admits the success-of-failure principle for the Christian, it preaches and promotes the visible incarnation of eschatological values.

This human approach of Vatican II helps avoid certain dichotomies that have plagued religious thinking in the past.

The age-old antinomies between active life and contemplative life are largely transcended by Vatican II, which sees life in personalist terms. Charity, whether contemplative or apostolic (*Perf. caritatis*, nn.7-8), becomes the dominant theme, and the person chooses one orientation or the other as his goal. The life of prayer and apostolic endeavors are two expressions of charity, part of the rhythm of every Christian life, inside and outside the cloister. The question confronting the active religious is not holiness versus apostolate, or personal sanctification and external works for others. It is to achieve the former via the latter, to construct an apostolic spirituality which will find one’s sanctification, not apart from the daily tasks, but through them, with the traditional means of religious life—vows, prayer, penance, community life—all taking on an apostolic coloration to fit the orientation of the particular vocation (*ibid.*, n.8). If the apostolate is dissociated from personal union with God, activism is the result. If personal union is nourished by a spiritual program unrelated to one’s apostolic vocation, pietism is had. Both are errors; both are failures to integrate the interior and exterior, the personal and the social elements. An apostolic spirituality will not solve the tensions between the love of God and a full human life. It will not tell how much prayer is needed for a balanced life, nor what kind. But it sets the person on the straight road of charity and integrates both expressions of charity—prayer and work—in an organic unity and dynamic

interaction. To put the matter in more familiar terms, holiness is not something one develops in chapel and cloister alone. Apostolic holiness finds its center in prayer only in the contemplative vocation; for active religious the expression *par excellence* of their union with God are the works of mercy, and even their prayer life ministers to this goal. This is a liberating doctrine for many. The spiritual exercises of a community dedicated to apostolic projects of an external nature will not be those of a contemplative order transferred bodily to an active setting. Rather, the community exercises will be tailored to fit the objectives of the active congregation.

Active communities then will have a flexible schedule that does not make impossible demands. A spare program of daily Mass, Lauds, Vespers and Compline, and one or other community devotions seems better adapted to a busy apostolate than a contemplative structure of the full Office and long hours in chapel. If private prayers are left private—for example, if an hour of private prayer (meditation) is legislated but left to the individual as regards time and place—then the demands of prayerfulness and involvement seem better served. Many other questions are enlightened by this more practical approach, like the place of the community or the apostolate as the center of religious life, the necessity of conforming to traditional forms of apostolate or breaking out into new ones, the flexibility to be allowed individuals regarding attendance at community exercises. There are no easy solutions to these problems, but they are impossible problems unless the community thinks correctly about its goals and objectives.

## ECCLESIAL

Perhaps the fundamental characteristic of post-Vatican II spirituality is its emphasis on community. Religious life as we know it today owes its origin to the attempt to recapture the apostolic life of Christ's first

disciples and of the primitive Church in Jerusalem described in the Acts of the Apostles. These Christians attempted to express in community a life of adoration and charity under a common Father.

Religious life is community life. What does this mean? It means that both sanctification and apostolate are sought in the context of living with other people. From the viewpoint of personal growth this approach is sound. Growth into personhood is attained in outgoing love, and the interaction of the group is the atmosphere in which this love can prosper. Theologically God's life in us expresses itself in love of the brethren (1 John 4:7-21). The community thus becomes for the individual religious the sacrament of God's presence.

In a true sense religious make their vows to the community. They commit themselves to this concrete family with its own physiognomy of political structure and social goals. Each religious community is a segment of the Body of the Church itself. Not part of the hierarchical structure but part of the "life and holiness" of the Church (*Lumen gentium*, n.44), a religious community is not made up of have's and have-not's, rulers and ruled, but of equals. It is essentially a peer group in which the superior stands in the midst as one who serves. All must be given a role in government, all must contribute toward creating a community. So, for example, there should be as few secrets in community as possible. Classes of membership should be removed. Even hallowed titles like "Mother Superior" have questionable value.

Religious spirituality will concern itself with building this kind of community. How is this done? Material being together is the lesser part. Perhaps in the past we have set far too much store by the principle of everyone doing the same thing at the same time. This has a relative value. But standing next to each other in common work or worship is less important than adult dialogue,

genuine communication, true fraternal love. Common meals during which there is a sense of oneness in Christ, common recreation in which there is a sincere attempt to share, participation in the Liturgy in which the group listens to the Word of God together and nourishes their mutual love in the Eucharist, these are the means which perfect community and prepare a group of men or women to face common tasks in the Church. This kind of community achieves personhood; in fact, personhood is its correlative and condition. This is why silence and solitude are necessary for real community. They are necessary for persons to be themselves, hence necessary for community. The religious forms that foster silence and solitude need an overhauling. Silence according to times and places is largely an ineffective instrument today, except for pragmatic reasons of not disturbing others. But if such legislation is not sufficient, other ways must be substituted to develop self—possession and independence. Cultivating a listening attitude is a help; insuring “space” for oneself and others whereby one can be alone even in a crowd is a kind of twentieth century solitude. But silence must alternate with genuine communication. For this purpose the size of a community is an important issue. It cannot be too large (e.g., 100) or too small (e.g., 5 or 6) without community suffering. Perhaps sub-groups within the larger group can compensate for the physical impossibility of welding a large number of people into a close-knit unity.

True communities perform an apostolic function by witnessing in their very being to the reality of redemption in Christ. Their external works incarnate the love of Christ and neighbor which achieves their oneness in the first place. Each community shows forth Christ in various ways, “contemplating on the mountain, announcing

God’s kingdom to the multitude, healing the sick and maimed, turning sinners to wholesome fruit, blessing children, doing good to all.” (*Lumen gentium*, n.46) The immediate value of these works, the incarnational value, is an evident and tangible contribution to the city of man. But the more important witness puts forward another dimension, the eschatological value.

In this perspective the works of religious are testimonies to faith. Whether they make a social or cultural contribution or not, religious manifest the sanctity of the Church in as unambiguous a way as possible. Their works are incarnations of faith, actions palpably inspired and achieved by charity. A Christian family witnesses Christian values in its daily life. But such a family will act much as any other good family, Christian or not, so that the properly faith value, the eschatological witness, may be concealed. The good works and prayer of religious have no observable motivation other than faith and charity. Religious, in the world as they are, are able to witness to the fact that the Christian must be not of this world, by the fact that their lives make sense only to the eyes of faith. If religious life today does not always speak this lesson, if the poverty of religious has become security and their celibacy an excuse of selfishness, these are signs of the need for the renewal and adaptation called for by Vatican II.

To sum up, then, religious spirituality has moved back toward a basic Christian spirituality. It is nourished at the same fonts, expressed in similar ways as those of Christians everywhere. Religious are different from married Christians or single laymen in the world. But basically they are only Christians trying to live the Gospel perfectly according to the special insight and example of a holy founder.