

□ CHAPTER NINE □

*The Journey from the Side Chapel
to the Main Aisle: Religious Life
in the Postconciliar Church*

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THE TITLE FOR this essay is inspired by the wonderful metaphor used by John Manuel Lozano to capture the ecclesial tone of the dramatic transformation of religious life unleashed by Vatican Council II:

From the “side chapels” in which religious orders used to sit (each with their own advocacies, devotions and privileges), they have moved out into the “main aisle” of the church. There is a strong ecclesial orientation in their spirituality and a sense of communion with the rest of God’s people.¹

The ecclesiological principles enunciated in the documents of Vatican II have shaped the direction of religious life in ways that could not have been imagined prior to the council. The developments that have taken place in the renewal of religious life over the past thirty years reflect critical paradigmatic shifts in ecclesiology that have both called into question and radically affirmed the very nature and meaning of religious life within the life of the Church. In fact, it could be argued that the changes in

the Church's self-understanding during Vatican II are nowhere more dramatically seen than in the continuing transformation of religious life.

Among the many conciliar and postconciliar documents that present and develop the teaching of the council regarding religious life, for the purpose of this discussion, the most significant are, not surprisingly, the two constitutions that treat directly of the Church — *Lumen Gentium* (*Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, November 21, 1964) and *Gaudium et Spes* (*Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, December 7, 1965) — as well as *Perfectae Caritatis* (*Decree on the Up-to-Date Renewal of the Religious Life*, October 28, 1965).² *Lumen Gentium* (LG) explicitly addresses the relationship of religious life to the life of the Church, while *Gaudium et Spes* (GS) sets the tone for understanding the fundamental relationship of the Church, including religious life, to the world. *Perfectae Caritatis* (PC) focuses specifically on the renewal of religious life according to two guiding principles: a return to the biblical roots of religious life as the following of the Christ of the gospels and to the spirit and charism of the founder of the particular institute; and the need for appropriate accommodations to the contemporary situation.³

In the first section of this essay, I shall draw primarily on these documents to explore three focal elements of the council's ecclesiology in regard to religious life: the universal nature of the call to holiness, the role of charisms in the life of the Church, and the nature of the Church's relationship to its historical context, i.e., the Church's mission in and to the world. In the second section, I shall identify some major areas of concern that present some of the more pressing tasks facing institutes of consecrated life⁴ as they move into the twenty-first century: the ongoing struggle for clarity around identity and mission, the growing movement toward collaboration, and the nature of the corporate witness of religious life — areas that challenge today's men and women religious to a creative fidelity to their rich heritage as they move forward into the future as witnesses to Christ's compassion for the world.

To capture the heart of Vatican II's teaching in regard to religious life and to describe where religious life is now in its

ongoing response to the council's challenge are daunting tasks, to say the very least. The reflection that follows comes from one who has lived the vowed religious life for thirty years, a period of time that coincides exactly with the period of renewal of religious life that has followed the Second Vatican Council.⁵ As with all perspectives, mine is both uniquely enriched and necessarily limited by my experience; I offer it in the hope that it will contribute to a more complete understanding of the complex reality that is religious life at the dawn of the twenty-first century.

What the Council Said: Call, Charism, Context

The Universal Call to Holiness

Vatican Council II did a great service to religious life when it replaced the operative preconciliar ecclesiology (with its clearly articulated ranks and states) with an ecclesiology built on an understanding of the universal call to holiness, a call rooted in the grace of baptism. With the promulgation of *Lumen Gentium* in 1964, the popular understanding of the Church as divided into three tiers of descending degrees of holiness (i.e., clergy, religious, and laity) was challenged by the clear affirmation that all Christians, regardless of the forms and tasks of their lives, are called to one and the same holiness, the perfect holiness given to the Church by its head, Jesus Christ. By emphasizing the dignity and importance of baptism, *Lumen Gentium* affirmed the role of all Christians in the mission and ministry of the Church: to realize the one holiness of the Church itself in many and varied expressions. All baptized persons are called to the fullness of Christian life and to the perfection of charity; moreover, the evangelical counsels have a place in the life of all Christians.⁶

In rejecting the clergy/religious/lay division, the Church embraced a self-understanding in which, to enlarge upon Lozano's metaphor, religious life no longer found its home in the side chapels of the Church (between the sanctuary of the bishops and priests and the body of the laity); religious suddenly found themselves situated squarely in the main aisle with their lay brothers and sisters. Religious life had lost its claim to an identity

as a privileged “state of perfection.”⁷ Prior to the council, by their very self-definition, religious had understood themselves to be superior to and separated from the lay or secular members of the Church itself; now, by virtue of their baptismal call to the one holiness of the Church, the laity could no longer be considered as belonging to a form of Christian life somehow inferior to that of the clergy or religious. Religious did not simply relinquish any claim to superiority over or separation from the laity; non-ordained religious were themselves identified as laity in contradistinction to clergy.

The question of the place of religious life within the structure of the Church remained a significantly controversial one and eventually led to an interesting development in the final drafting of *Lumen Gentium*. Prior to Vatican II, it had been accepted that the hierarchical structure of the Church, i.e., the distinction made between the clergy and the lay faithful whom they pastor, is an essential constitutive divine structure of the Church.⁸ The 1963 working draft reflected this teaching when it suggested that

[the religious state] is not, if one considers the divine constitution of the Church, intermediate between the clerical and lay condition: but some faithful from both states are called by God to enjoy this special gift in the mystery of the Church, and are dedicated to his service.⁹

This initial formulation rejected the popular triple division which placed religious life somewhere between the clerical state and the secular laity, but it also implied that religious life does not belong essentially to the divine structure of the Church. After much debate and a number of forceful interventions by the Council fathers, the text was amended to read:

[The religious state] . . . is not, if one considers the divine *and hierarchical* constitution of the Church, intermediate between the clerical and lay condition: but some faithful from both states are called by God to enjoy this special gift in the *life*

of the Church and *may contribute, each in their own way, to its saving mission.*¹⁰

The definitive text of *Lumen Gentium* suggests that there is not simply one divine constitution in the Church. Rather, the concept of "the divine constitution of the church" is a generic one which requires specification in terms of which divine constitution is intended in a given context.¹¹ This conclusion is further strengthened by the final paragraph of No. 44 of *Lumen Gentium*:

The state of life, then, which is constituted by the profession of the evangelical counsels, while not belonging to the hierarchical structure of the church, belongs nevertheless inalienably to its life and holiness.

There is a necessary and essential relatedness between the Church and religious life; religious life belongs to the very life and holiness of the Church as an essential constitutive structure.¹² This relatedness is reiterated by John Paul II in his recent exhortation *Vita Consecrata (VC)*, which teaches that

the consecrated life, present in the church from the beginning, can never fail to be one of her essential and characteristic elements, for it expresses her very nature. This is clearly seen from the fact that the profession of the evangelical counsels is intimately connected with the mystery of Christ and has the duty of making somehow present the way of life which Jesus himself chose. . . . Jesus himself, by calling some men and women to abandon everything in order to follow him, established this type of life which, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, would gradually develop down the centuries into the various forms of the consecrated life. The idea of a church made up only of sacred ministers and lay people does not therefore conform to the

intentions of her divine founder, as revealed to us by the Gospels and the other writings of the New Testament.¹³

While *Lumen Gentium* clearly recognized that religious life belongs “inalienably” to the Church, it did leave a vagueness about the “how” and “where” it fits into the Church’s structure. Some religious found the lack of clarity on this point difficult to live with. They were uncomfortable with the fact that, unlike the concept of the hierarchy (whose nature it is to have distinctions and exclusive categories), the place of religious life in the structure of the Church had not been defined as clearly. Many religious actually pushed the Church to pin things down a bit more; much to their chagrin, the Church has been working at it ever since. Responding to the discomfort, the council itself produced a separate document on religious life, *Perfectae Caritatis*, in 1965. *Essential Elements* (1985) and *Vita Consecrata* (1996) represent subsequent attempts to clarify further the nature of religious life. Unfortunately, these later documents return to an emphasis on distinctions and categories, running the risk of creating a new elitism. In other words, they use a hierarchical approach to analyze a non-hierarchical reality, a charism given to the Church by the Spirit. A clear nomenclature of charism is an oxymoron. The clarifications have sometimes produced new and equally effective straitjackets for religious because abstract definitions, while helpful, always lose something of the nuanced reality of the concrete particularity of each institute’s charism. The genius of *Lumen Gentium* had been precisely to let go of the need for categories in relationship to religious life: the hierarchical diocesan entity and religious life are not parallel structures.¹⁴

As postconciliar religious set about the challenging but liberating process of relinquishing their self-definition in terms of *de jure* as well as *de facto* superiority to other members of the Church, they sought and embraced a more ecclesial, if less rigidly defined, identity. Notwithstanding, the concept of religious life as a “state of perfection” still surfaced in new ways, as evidenced by John Paul II’s recent statements in *Vita Consecrata* regarding “the objective superiority” of the consecrated life.¹⁵ While affirming the

“equal dignity of all members of the church,” this papal exhortation describes religious profession primarily as a “deepening” of the consecration received in baptism, a “further consecration differing in a special way from baptismal consecration,” and a “more authentic configuration to Christ” which, as a way of showing forth the Church’s holiness, has an “objective superiority.”¹⁶ Aside from the evident difficulty in asking a theology of consecration to bear the full weight of the mystery of the gift of religious life in the Church, the language of this document also seems to indicate that the Church still has a long way to go in recognizing the dignity and centrality of baptism and the consequent equality of all the members of Christ’s body.¹⁷ Although there is certainly a validity to a theology of consecration based in baptism, perhaps it is a construct that alone cannot adequately account for the rich reality of religious life in the life of the Church today and in the future. In any case, as Archbishop Rembert G. Weakland has observed, it certainly does not seem to have emerged naturally from the lived experience of religious, nor have religious found the notion particularly liberating or inspiring.¹⁸

The recent introduction of the term “consecrated life” also points to another aspect of the Church’s understanding of religious life: the creative tension that exists between spirit and law, charism and institution. “Consecrated life” is intended to embrace both secular and religious institutes as a juridic framework within which to define each. (Indeed, *Vita Consecrata* strains to cover many diverse forms of life under a common rubric.) While the “secular” institute is clearly envisioned with positive content as a consecration *in* the world, the “religious” institute is seen as a consecration somehow contradistinct from that being-in-the-world, leaving the defining characteristic of religious institutes in a negative key, less in sync with the theology of *Lumen Gentium* and *Gaudium et Spes* and certainly not reflective of the lived experience of men and women religious over the past three decades. This attempt to systematize the various expressions of religious life into static legal categories flies in the face of the postconciliar emphasis on the creative work of the Spirit in shaping religious life as a living, evolving charism in and for the Church.

Another result of the emphasis on the universal call to holiness in *Lumen Gentium* is best reflected in the general consensus that Vatican II ushered in the era of the “church of the laity.” This term is not meant to signify a shift of emphasis from one “rank” to another, i.e., from a clerical model of church to a lay model. Such an interpretation would use “laity” as a category that excludes when just the opposite had been intended by the council. The post-Vatican II “church of the laity” really connotes a collaborative church which uses the gifts of all members, however the Spirit may see fit to distribute those gifts.

Religious Life as Charism

The Holy Spirit nurtures and directs the Church through the rich variety of gifts, ordinary and extraordinary, given for the good of the whole body of Christ. Religious life is just such a gift, or charism, given to individuals for the good of all, i.e., the whole church;¹⁹ consequently, religious life is more properly the treasure of the Church than the personal possession of those persons who exercise the charism in religious congregations.

While the Church recognizes, affirms, and claims charisms, it does not create the gifts. As charism, religious life is not simply or even primarily a juridical entity. In other words, religious life did not begin because the institutional Church defined it and conferred it, nor does it continue because Church law has ordained it so. The Church did not create religious life; the life endures because it is a gift of God to the Church, a constitutive element of the life and holiness of the Church. Religious life belongs to the mystery of the Church and, like the Church, it continues — sometimes despite itself. Of course, as institution, religious life needs law to serve its useful purpose: to recognize, authenticate, safeguard, and preserve valued ways of life. Charisms are situated within the Church as gifts of God who gives to the Church the pastoral authority and obligation to protect them by discerning the divinely inspired wisdom of the community’s experience and formulating that wisdom in canon law.²⁰ However, while it is entirely appropriate that, in due time, the experience of the religious institute find canonical expression for the protection of

the rights of persons, communities, and the whole Church, one must be careful not to mistake the canonical form for the life itself. Religious life is better understood in terms of a fluid, vital, ever-changing "movement" than in terms of institutional forms and canonical categories. Shaped by the Spirit, this movement is at its core a mystery which, although identifiable, is not completely definable in terms of essences.

A biblical understanding of "call" can help to distinguish religious life as an evolving ecclesial identity from religious life as a canonical "state of perfection." Both *Lumen Gentium* and *Gaudium et Spes* present religious life primarily as a way of living the gospel, a way of following Christ.²¹ The simple and direct gospel invitation, "Come, follow me," suggests that the charism of the religious vocation is a whole way of life, an organically coherent way of interacting with persons, situations and needs. Nourished by the life-giving Spirit, religious life is a prophetic, compassionate ongoing response to the call to live the life of Christ in a new time and place. Because it finds itself in the midst of historical reality, religious life digs deep into the messy stuff of holiness. True religious hesitate to depend upon such "certainties" as juridical prescriptions that promise to ensure a steady advance along the path of perfection; rather, they simply follow their loving Lord, struggling to respond in faith to the rigorous standard of the gospel amidst the sometimes confusing circumstances of their lives without the luxury of knowing exactly where they are in that mysterious journey of faith.

Any theological project that reduces religious life to an entity defined by canons reveals an essentialist and predominantly juridical mentality. While they may provide a convenient tool for judging authenticity and orthodoxy, canonical definitions and norms are only capable of giving religious life an existence as an enduring, unchangeable "essence," reducing religious life in the concrete to nothing more than a manifestation of an "essence," which tends to express itself in antisecular and ahistorical terms. As Philibert has observed,

it would be unfortunate if one were to try to reduce religious life to a genus and species

analysis. There is no simple common denominator that can be used as the generic form for religious life. Religious life arises genetically from the inspired, charismatic response to the gospel of a creative genius whose work is continued by a religious family of sisters and brothers beyond the original time and place of its foundation.²²

To use a simple analogy, the difference between religious life as a defined static essence and religious life as a charismatic way of life is similar to the difference between a clay figure made from a mold and the clay pot formed by the master potter at the wheel. The first is a dime-a-dozen, painted-by-numbers, lifeless copy, however intricate and perfect the detail; the second is a genuine work of art whose beauty lies in the uniqueness of its form. The canonical prescription may produce an "objectively superior" life form, but it is the honest following of Christ that yields the true gift of religious life to the Church. Religious life is a way of self-forgetfulness whereby one concentrates, not on actively conforming oneself to a pre-existing mold, but rather on being receptive and pliable to the touch of the master potter's hand. The pot is always being shaped anew. Of course, in the religious institute one finds a "family" resemblance, a particular "way" (or shape to the pot), which springs from the original inspiration of the institute's founder; yet each individual in the institute is formed, coaxed by the Spirit into that unique, particular expression of the mystery of Christ imbedded deep within his or her very being. The particular institute's "way" of self-forgetfulness allows each member's true self to emerge unspoiled by an inflexible external mold.

As soon as one defines religious life in canonical forms, one runs the risk of destroying its very life. The following of Christ always involves concrete situations in a changing world that demands answers to new questions, and answers to new questions are not obtained by sheer deduction from juridical premises and categories. Religious institutes are not primarily verifications of a species, but unique, historically identifiable communities living the evangelical counsels. When one looks at the origins of a religious

congregation, one finds a charismatic, Spirit-filled response conditioned by the concrete circumstances of its world — not a canonically-inspired state of consecrated separation from that world. The vowed life as lived by a particular institute is shaped by the mission and charism of that institute, both of which necessarily respond to a specific historical and cultural experience and environment.²³ The resulting diversity among religious institutes is itself the Spirit's gift to the Church.

Perfectae Caritatis also called upon religious to return to the founding charisms of their institutes. As a result, many congregations were led to rewrite their constitutions in the years following Vatican II. Following the mandate to go back to their roots in the gospel and in the lives of their founders, religious institutes came to the realization that their founding charisms had less to do with what the founders did and more to do with the "eyes" through which they had viewed their world. The charism is not so much the type of work, but rather the "way" in which one is present in that work. Consequently, in reformulating their constitutions, religious sought to deemphasize canonical categories in an effort to reclaim the true spirit of their founding charisms. They discovered that precise categories and distinctions fail to capture the playful breath of the Spirit and that theirs is a way of life as opposed to a canonical state. Again, it is the difference between the technique of using a mold (the perfect mold, recipe, ingredients, temperature, etc.) and the art of the potter's wheel (a changing atmosphere, moisture, a steady hand, the unpredictable irregularities that become the hallmark of true beauty).

*The Context: The Church in the Contemporary World*²⁴

Lumen Gentium and *Perfectae Caritatis* are the two documents of Vatican II that dealt explicitly with the topic of religious life; however, a study of these two documents alone would fail to account for the dramatic changes in religious life in the years following the council. It is the *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (Gaudium et Spes)* which actually provides the clarifying prism through which one must see all the other documents of Vatican II, including those which address issues of

religious life. *Gaudium et Spes*, an unexpected gift of the Spirit working in the gathered church, called the Church to realize that it is inextricably and intimately linked to humankind and its history:²⁵ all that is truly human — the joy, hope, grief, and anguish of all humankind — cannot fail to find an echo in the hearts of those who follow Christ.²⁶ Moreover, the Church's prophetic mission to the world cannot be fulfilled if its message is unintelligible to that world, especially to the poor and the marginalized members of the human family.

Religious, who have always understood themselves to be at the heart of the Church and its mission, were deeply affected by the powerful message of *Gaudium et Spes*. They quickly grasped its significance for their lives. Whereas, prior to Vatican II, religious life had functioned as a prophetic sign within the Church's inner life by witnessing to a radical living of the evangelical counsels, postconciliar religious life was challenged to be a sign in and to the world as an integral part of the Church's mission in the world. The implications were dramatic: if religious were to be effective and credible witnesses in service to the Church's mission in the modern world, they needed to be relevant and intelligible to that world; conversely, if they were to participate in the proclamation of the good news of the gospel to their world, religious must understand that world, its problems and its needs, especially the needs of the poor.

Complicating matters for religious institutes was the fact that the "modern world" in which they were navigating a course from a medieval "state of perfection" to a prophetic "way of life" was itself in the throes of a major paradigm shift from modernity to the as-yet-unnamed age labeled only as "postmodernity." Postconciliar religious found themselves embracing the challenges of the dawning postmodern era without having had the advantage of actively participating in the modern world. In other words, religious life was forced to go from a pre-modern (medieval) worldview to a postmodern worldview in one leap, fastforwarding through centuries of modernity.²⁷ Religious had scarcely become acquainted with modern culture before they began to wrestle with the implications of the postmodern critique that rejected the individualism, competition, and hierarchical dualism (the either-or,

right-wrong, sacred-secular, superior-inferior distinctions that define by separation and fragmentation) of the modern age in favor of holistic interrelatedness, cooperation, and unity-in-diversity (the creative tension of inclusive, both-and relationships of equality) in a postmodern global society that values pluralism.

Since the council did not return to the role of religious after the promulgation of *Gaudium et Spes* in 1965, religious were left to explore for themselves their relationship to the Church and the emerging postmodern world in light of the new way in which the whole Church was entering into dialogue with that same world.²⁸ In the period following the council, religious institutes enthusiastically set about the task of adapting their life and ministry to meet the challenges of *Gaudium et Spes*. They quickly grasped that, since the Church had explicitly located its mission in the world in solidarity with all humankind, it was absolutely incongruous for religious to seek an identity as “separated” from that world. The reformulation of their constitutions allowed religious institutes not only to reflect more clearly their original sources of inspiration (namely, the gospel and the founding charisms of their institutes), but also to incorporate their newly expanded understanding of their mission to and in the modern world. Religious pursued the goals of the council with relentless enthusiasm and a profound trust in the Spirit’s abiding presence. In the process, they rediscovered that their authentic mission lies not in achieving a canonical ideal, but in responding as Christ to a very real world.

With the impetus provided by *Gaudium et Spes*, religious embraced human experience as a legitimate locus of truth and the world as a sacred place, a place where one can find holiness. The resulting movement away from a sacred/secular dualism began to chip away at some of the ways that the religious and apostolic dimensions of religious life had been dichotomized. For example, in the preconciliar paradigm, the “world” had distracted religious from the “sacred,” so they disavowed the world to enter the “state of perfection.” Consequently, contact with “seculars” in one’s ministry had been kept to an absolute minimum (even visits from family members were restricted). In the years following the council, however, religious grappled with the image of Church as leaven in the world and eventually relinquished their more

privileged self-understanding as beacons of holiness in an alien world. In the process, many dualisms were challenged, especially those that tended to divide or hierarchicalize religious life itself: clerical/lay, cloistered/non-cloistered, contemplative/active. Religious recognized that the active life, which is more directly involved in the lives and concerns of people, is truly in harmony with and not in opposition to the contemplative dimension of religious life, i.e., seeing with the eyes of God. Religious holiness and presence in the world are not antithetical: one embraces the world in order to find God in it.

In his postconciliar apostolic exhortation, *Evangelica Testificatio* (1971), Paul VI highlighted the prophetic nature and spiritual value of the insertion of religious into the life of the world:

How then will the cry of the poor find an echo in your lives? That cry must, first of all, bar you from whatever would be a compromise with any form of social injustice. It obliges you also to awaken consciences to the drama of misery and to the demands of social justice made by the Gospel and the Church. It leads some of you to join the poor in their situation and to share their bitter cares.²⁹

[The] religious life, if it is to be renewed, must adapt its accidental forms to certain changes which are affecting with growing rapidity and to an increasing extent the conditions of life of every human being . . . Deep understanding of present tendencies and of the needs of the modern world should cause your own sources of energy to spring up with renewed vigor and freshness. It [an authentic living of religious life in the context of the modern world] is a sublime task in the measure that it is a difficult one.³⁰

By gaining insight into their own times, religious were able to develop sharper “ears” with which to hear the cry of the poor,

the cry to which they aspire to respond with the compassion of Christ, in whose footsteps they have chosen to follow. Heeding the message of *Gaudium et Spes*, they wholeheartedly embraced the "duty of scrutinizing the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the gospel."³¹ As a result, many religious congregations adopted the prophetic vision articulated in the postconciliar *Justitia in Mundo* from the 1971 Synod of Bishops:

Action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appear to us as a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel.³²

Reflecting on the example of Jesus presented in the gospels as well as on statements coming from both the Vatican and from the Latin American bishops' meetings in Medellín (1968) and Puebla (1979), religious turned their attention to the poor, the oppressed, and the marginalized of society, all who are considered and treated as "the least."³³ In evaluating and redefining their ministerial commitments since the council, religious institutes have struggled to witness to a true "preferential option for the poor," not only in terms of living a life of poverty, but also of embracing the cause of the poor by denouncing social injustices and promoting justice in the society and culture in which they work, each according to its own charism.³⁴ Perhaps more than any other factor, the preferential option for the poor continues to serve as a guiding principle for prophetic witness and ministry within religious congregations.

Today's Agenda: Clarity, Compassion, Collaboration, and Corporate Witness

*Clarity of Identity and Mission:
Compassion and Prophetic Witness*

As religious life strives to find a language with which to speak its truth in the postmodern pluralistic world, clarity remains an elusive commodity. Religious life has found it difficult to

disengage itself from its highly institutionalized form. The sweeping revisions of congregational constitutions and statements of purpose have only partially succeeded in dealing with the tension that exists between religious life as charism and religious life as institution. Now, after thirty years; perhaps it is time for religious institutes to turn their attention away from the task of pinning down the structure of religious life in favor of looking more to its mission and ministry in the postmodern age. The renewal of religious life called for by Vatican II is not a discrete *task*, but a continuing *way* of responding to the world. Each religious community is called to ongoing discernment of what its future is to be. The conciliar goal was never to accomplish a “renewal” (i.e., a restructuring of “religious life”) but rather to free religious life to be religious afresh in each new age and circumstance, prophesying by its very life lived in relationship to an ever-changing world.

In the years following the council, many religious experienced a certain ambivalence in terms of their identity within the structure of the Church. During a time when the gospels replaced the Rule as the primary formative influence, they enthusiastically undertook what turned out to be the somewhat incongruous task of rewriting their constitutions and statements of purpose — incongruous because the very process of rewriting constitutions does little to help religious institutes experience their identity apart from canonical categories. As a result, religious life has yet to claim fully its charismatic identity as it struggles to move away from a primarily institutional self-understanding. In answer to the challenge of *Gaudium et Spes*, it seeks to be faithful to what it always has been, the following of Christ, but a following in new modalities more in tune with a postmodern, global, interfaith world. A great challenge facing religious life as it moves into the postmodern age will be to keep its focus on Christ and to seek clarity of identity in terms of its charism, its “way” of being Christ’s presence in the world, rather than in terms of canonical categories and juridical distinctions. Identity for the members of a religious institute lies in their unfailing attachment to and faithful imitation of Christ.

The freedom and flexibility evident in the post-Vatican II

recasting of religious life have had a paradoxical effect in terms of clarity. Prior to the council, the highly institutionalized structure of religious life bore the burden of projecting a clear identity and mission (e.g., one could hardly mistake the identity and mission of the highly visible armies of habited worker bees staffing hospitals, schools, etc.) The life of the religious was prescribed in minute detail. Since Vatican II, as religious exercise considerable personal freedom in the way they live out their vows, each individual is more responsible for the clarity and integrity of his or her witness to the living of the evangelical counsels. As a result, today's religious have the opportunity to embrace the counsels, not by a blanket acceptance of a complex set of structures as a whole, but by a conscious discernment of God's call in every individual choice they make. As a result, the evangelical counsels and the institute's charism find expression in the life of a religious because he or she has owned them in a uniquely personal way rather than because structures have put them there. Paradoxically, while it is possible for religious to live with greater personal authenticity today, their corporate identity seems less clear because each member expresses that identity in an individual and original way.

Because charism is more properly revealed in one's "way of presence" in ministry rather than in the specific tasks performed, the search for clarity demands that religious concentrate more on the "gift to" than on the "gift of" — to whom and in what way is one present in the Church's mission to the world? The kind of self-forgetfulness that focuses on Christ and sees the world through his eyes yields the most authentic witness: a compassion — a "suffering with" — that embraces the poor, the marginalized, those who are most oppressed by the agenda of modernity. Compassion for the world is perhaps the best measure of holiness because to be one with Christ, whose suffering embraces the world's suffering, is to "suffer with" the world. To meet this challenge, religious must also come to a certain degree of clarity about their context, the radical pluralism of the postmodern world. The result will be an example of the classic balance between contemplation and action: while religious keep their eyes on Christ in order to become the eyes of Christ with which to see

the world, religious also must keep their eyes on the world in order to bring the light of Christ's vision to the darkest corners of that world.

The final paradox of clarity results from the fact that religious life is not about self-conscious identity, but rather about an invisibility in which all attention is focused on the one being served. Love is self-gift, not self-consciousness. In a sense, religious find their truest identity in self-forgetfulness: when they lose themselves in Christ and his mission, they become truly visible as Christ's compassionate presence in the world. Christ is both whom they see and the seeing itself. Because no individual or community can exhaust the richness that is Christ, the different religious institutes focus on specific facets of Christ's way of being present in and to the world and try to follow his lead. According to their specific charism or "way" of being present, religious look to the world in compassion, picking up on those cries of the poor that are not being heard by others. Postconciliar religious are being called out of the privileged seclusion of a Catholic culture into a global world where their prophetic witness gives visibility to gospel values that might otherwise be forgotten. Religious often serve needs that have been neglected by the society; when a need is recognized by society and others pick up their work, religious must be ready to move on in compassion to new needs, always seeing with Christ's eyes and leading the Church in new directions. For this reason, religious life will always be rooted in an existential experience of the contemporary world, not in pre-existing, free-floating "essences." Because of this, the specific forms of that life will remain provisional, responsive to being reshaped by the Spirit to recognize and speak the truth in new situations.

Because clarity of form is an element that can make religious life an attractive option for idealistic young people, there is a temptation to return to more clearly-defined structures and forms when a religious institute experiences a shrinking number of new vocations. It must be remembered that today's drop in numbers is not unprecedented in the history of religious life. Whenever the Church begins to understand its mission in new ways, the impact is often dramatic in terms of the effect on vocations to religious life (e.g., when mendicant orders and apostolic congregations

appeared in response to the needs of the Church in a changing society, monastic and cloistered communities dwindled in numbers). The advent of the era of the laity in the post-Vatican II Church has allowed religious life to return to its more natural state as a prophetic minority. However, the fact that laypersons are assuming tasks formerly done by religious does not mean that religious life is no longer necessary. Religious life is not a service organization that can be replaced by other, more efficient service groups. Clarity about the prophetic nature of religious life ensures that religious life will continue to be understood, not as a social institution, but as a way of life in which one seeks to embody Christ's being in the world, a world whose changing needs will continue to dictate new charisms or "ways" of responding in compassion.

A challenge for religious today is to risk giving priority to prophetic witness in a postmodern world rather than focusing their energies on simply preserving religious life. In other words, the age-old tension between charism and institution must be negotiated once again. Christ's compassionate presence must be realized in each new age, however that presence is best embodied or institutionalized. Institution and law stand in service to charism; and charism is a gift to the context, a way of bringing Christ's presence to the world. The charismatic founders of religious communities are those who look outward to their world, its forgotten values, its unmet needs, its unheard cries; the later generations of members tend to maintain the institution built on the founding charism. Pre-Vatican II religious life was very involved in such maintenance, requiring managers who are inclined to look inward to the past. Vatican II has called religious to look outward at their world, especially the poor, the marginalized, and the oppressed. It is once again time for prophetic charismatic leaders to reclaim the original vibrancy of a founding charism and bring that gift to the postmodern world.

Collaboration and Corporate Witness

A second major challenge facing religious life in the future lies in the area of collaboration. Charisms are gifts for the whole

Church, and the charism of religious life is no exception. A charism is given not in order to be admired or compared, but to be used in collaboration with other charisms in bringing about the reign of God. No single charism exhausts the richness of the gospel. The charism of religious life is meant to complement, not compete with, the other charisms present in the Church's life. As with a mosaic, each individual piece is needed, but the beauty is found in the whole, not in any single piece. When religious institutes work in collaboration with each other and with the clergy and laity, each brings its unique gift and enhances the ministry of the whole Church. The gospel paradox holds true: one must lose oneself in order to save oneself.³⁵ In other words, when religious life focuses more on furthering the mission of the whole Church than on clarifying its own identity, its charism is realized with greater effectiveness. By "losing" its high institutional visibility, a religious institute may actually exercise its charism with more authenticity and clarity because its individual charism is less likely to distract from the Church's communal mission to proclaim the fullness of the gospel.

In some ways, the growing movement toward collaboration among religious communities may seem to be a matter of mere survival in response to external factors operating on religious life. A closer examination suggests that it may be an example of the Spirit's informing the future shape of religious life. In other words, circumstances may be the potter's way of remolding religious life when good intentions are not enough. For example, after an unusual era of ever-growing armies of religious staffing flourishing hospitals, schools, and social service agencies, the number of religious has dwindled, and they are less visible in these ministries. At the same time, lay members of the community have come forward to manage and staff Church institutions. While it still remains difficult for founding congregations to relinquish control of their institutions, many religious communities have done so and are involved in various federations and mergers in order to ensure the continuation of the needed ministries these institutions provide. Collaboration has become a necessity rather than an interesting theory.

In a broader evaluation, collaboration may be the charism

specifically required in today's pluralistic world. In the postmodern era, perhaps the proclamation of the gospel message will be best served by a collaborative "world wide web" model as opposed to a pyramidal "chain letter." Each charism logs directly onto the "website" of the Church's mission and interacts with the whole in an immediate, lateral, and openly collaborative way, rather than through a hierarchical chain-of-command model. The issues facing a multicultural global Church in a pluralistic world demand the postmodern values of cooperation, inclusivity, and mutuality, values that critique the individualism, fragmentation, and isolation so identified with the modern age. The wisdom and insights gained through the many collaborative efforts made by religious institutes over the past thirty years (e.g., co-membership and associate membership programs, intercommunity living, and intercongregational projects, federations, and mergers, etc.) will bear much fruit in the Church in the postmodern age. Moreover, because religious congregations will be logging onto the "web" of the Church's mission precisely as real communities, they will stand in prophetic opposition to the anonymity of a postmodern "virtual" community.

The ability to collaborate and effect change laterally also calls for a new emphasis on corporateness, not in terms of an homogenized conformity but as a model of mutuality, interdependence, and genuine community. In the preconciliar Church, structures gave great clarity of identity to the group, albeit at the cost of an institutionalism that often consumed the individual members who were able to exercise little personal influence on that identity. After the council, when structures have tended to be less obvious, the corporate sense has diminished, and each individual religious seems to bear the burden of representing the whole institution singlehandedly, i.e., in any given circumstance, an individual member's personal choices regarding lifestyle and ministry have the effect of forging the identity of the group. The challenge for religious life today is one of being corporate in new self-forgetful ways that stretch the members to use their unique individual gifts collaboratively in the Church's common mission and that allow the gospel message to become more visible in a pluralistic world. The corporate apostolic witness of religious life will continue to

be a source of power, not in the sense of a dualistic “power over,” but in its impact on the web of interconnections that are affected by the self-forgetful, collaborative exercise of charisms. While, on the one hand, religious are striving to achieve greater clarity around identity and charisma, their seeming invisibility may be the identifying characteristic of the gift they are being called to be for the Church in the postmodern world. Perhaps religious life will have achieved its purpose when the Church no longer views it as a privileged center of power, when the gospel is proclaimed by all members of the Church without any sense that religious life has a special claim to “proprietaryship” of the gospel mission. What the onlooker will see is Christ and his church, not religious life. In what seems to be a losing of its “identity,” religious life may be most authentically what it has always been called to be: a gift of Christ’s spirit animating the body, the Church. As religious become self-forgetful animators of a collaborative model of church, their very invisibility will be, in fact, a most profound clarity.

To return once again to Lozano’s metaphor, the movement of religious life from a “side chapel” to the “main aisle” is simply an indication that the Church has come to understand itself as a whole: the Church, is all the people of God, the one body of Christ. The Church’s self-understanding is diminished when too much emphasis is placed on a division of its members into categories. Baptized Christians may have different roles within the Church by virtue of their charisms, but their one baptism assures their equal membership in Christ.³⁶ Stretching the metaphor, one can say that the Church is the whole building, not simply a composite of a sanctuary (hierarchy) plus side chapels (religious life) plus icons and statues (saints) plus the middle aisle (laity). While the constituent parts may be essential to its structure, the Church must keep its focus on the integrity of the whole.³⁷ Just as the human person cannot be defined solely in terms of complex relationships between physiological systems and organs, so the Church cannot be adequately defined in terms of the canonical status of its members. This is not new theology, but an early Pauline doctrine that had been somewhat obscured by layers of theological complexity arising from the medieval fascination with categories and distinctions.³⁸

Like it or not, with Vatican Council II, religious (and clergy, for that matter) found themselves in the main aisle, the body of the Church — still an essential part of the Church, but no longer an elite corps somehow superior in holiness to the ordinary baptized christian. Since religious life has always been a gift to and in the Church, it should not have been surprising that religious found themselves squarely in the midst of the laity at the precise moment when the era of the Church of the laity was inaugurated. Often, the gift religious life brings to any particular period in the Church's history is only clearly identified in retrospect. We recognize now, for example, that religious life in the period immediately preceding the council actually prepared today's laity for mission, both through a comprehensive ministry of education and also through the lives of the many religious who decided that they could serve the Church better as lay persons and thus left religious communities to take up new work. One of the great, still generally unrecognized gifts of religious life to the postconciliar Church was the influx of former religious to lay ministry, even if the Church was not quite ready to have them.³⁹

So what could at first be easily misconstrued as a loss of identity for religious life following the council slowly comes into clear focus: the Spirit's intention was the abolition of "ranks" of holiness within the structure of the Church, not a denial of the reality of religious life as an essential part of the Church. In the process, religious life was liberated from self-preoccupation with rigid structures in order to see again the world with the eyes of Christ and, seeing, to respond with his compassion to the as-yet-unheeded cries of the poor and marginalized of the contemporary world. Postconciliar religious life reflects a deeper sense of communion with all of God's people, finding its home in the main aisle, right in the midst of the Church's mission in and to the emerging postmodern world. Perhaps the gift religious life is now struggling to be for the Church will be evident and appreciated only in retrospect. However, as long as there are men and women accepting the challenge to follow Christ through a radical living of the evangelical counsels in each new age and circumstance, the Spirit will continue to surprise the Church through the gift of religious life.

Notes

1. John Manuel Lozano, C.M.F., "Religious Life: The Continuing Journey — Vision and Hope," in *Religious Life: The Challenge for Tomorrow*, ed. Cassian J. Yuhaus, CP (New York: Paulist Press, 1994), 145.

2. Unfortunately, the scope of this essay does not permit a full exploration of all conciliar and postconciliar documents that develop the council's teaching with regard to religious life. (See listing at the end of this essay.) For an excellent summary analysis of the many of the key documents, see Patricia F. Walter, O.P., "Religious Life in Church Documents," *Review for Religious* 51, no. 4 (July-August, 1992): 550-61.

3. PC 2.

4. "Consecrated life" is the relatively new term currently preferred by John Paul II to describe the whole range of responses to the invitation to live more completely the evangelical counsels, including hermits, contemplatives, religious orders, apostolic congregations, secular institutes, societies of apostolic life, etc.

5. DiIanni observes that, historically, twenty-five years seems to be the normal period of time required following an ecumenical council for the spirit of a council to take root and bear its best fruit. See Albert DiIanni, "Religious Life and Modernity," *Review for Religious* 50, no. 3 (May-June, 1991): 339.

6. See chapter five of *Lumen Gentium*, especially LG 39, 40, 42.

7. Walter, "Religious Life in Church Documents," summarizes this preconciliar concept as "a privileged way of life undertaken by those with enough nobility and strength of soul to obey Christ's counsels as well as the commandments. There was a focus on individual perfection achieved through total consecration to God and through a life of asceticism marked by penance, separation from the world, and the three-fold renunciation of the vows. Such an understanding was greatly influenced by Aquinas's theology of the counsels, nineteenth-century ascetical theology, and the 1917 Code of Canon Law" (551).

8. See 1917 Code of Canon Law, can. 948.

9. Page 21, lines 4ff. of the 1963 draft, as quoted by Msgr. Andrew M. Charue, Bishop of Namur, October 25, 1963. *Commissio de Doctrina Fidei et Morum: Patrum conciliarium animadversiones sive oraliter sive in scriptis traditae inde ab initio II. Sessionis. Caput IV, De Vocatione ad sanctitatem* (1964), 35-37; cf. *Acta Synodalia*, vol. 2, pars 3, 382-84, as noted in Paul Molinari, S.J., and Peter Gumpel, S.J., *Chapter VI of the Dogmatic Constitution Lumen Gentium on Religious Life: The Doctrinal*

Content in the Light of the Official Documents. (Rome: Tipografia Poliglotta della Pontificia Università Gregoriana, 1987), 11-14.

10. LG 43

11. The argument that this amendment represents a deliberate improvement rather than a mere accidental change is supported by the fact that the amendment of the text to include the insertion of the words "et hierarchicae" was made at the formal request of many fathers of the Council. Furthermore, the authoritative commentary of the Theological Commission on that passage mentions that the addition of "and hierarchical" serves to determine the specific aspect. For the most complete and illuminating discussion of this point, see Molinari and Gumpel, *Chapter VI of the Dogmatic Constitution*, 11-32.

12. Based on clear affirmations in the text as well as authoritative explanations by the doctrinal commission and taking into consideration the difficult history of the document and various problems with ambiguous terminology, Molinari and Gumpel, *Chapter VI of the Dogmatic Constitution*, 23-32, make a strong argument for the conclusion that according to the formal teaching of *Lumen Gentium*, there are two divine structures or constitutions of the Church: the hierarchical constitution and the pneumatic or charismatic constitution, which is based on the diversity with which Christians tend to holiness. In other words, there are within the Church persons who belong to the clergy and persons who do not, and there are some of the faithful, both clerical and lay, who bind themselves by vows to tend to holiness by the radical living of the evangelical counsels, whereas others of the faithful do not undertake such an obligation.

13. VC 20.

14. The non-parallelism between these two realities is nowhere more apparent than in the lives of clerical religious communities. Because the documents promoted the parish as the center of christian life, clerical religious were left with a dilemma: should the religious institute or the parish be the focus of their life? The Church has attempted to address some of the tensions in *Mutuae Relationes*.

15. Gottemoeller suggests that "excellence" is a better translation of the original Latin and Italian. The choice of the word "superiority" on the part of the English translators, however, suggests that there is a tendency among some Church officials to return to a ranking of the states of life according to degrees of holiness or perfection. See Doris Gottemoeller, R.S.M., "Some Reflections on *Vita Consecrata*," (Washington: Leadership Conference of Women Religious, 1996), 1.

16. VC 32.

17. John Paul's theology of consecration is the dominant theme of his teaching on religious life as articulated in *Redemptionis Donum* (1984), "Instruction on Essential Elements in the Church's Teaching on Religious Life as Applied to Institutes Dedicated to the Works of the Apostolate" (1985), *Vita Consecrata* (1996), and the 1983 revised Code of Canon Law, can. 573-746. In many ways, these later documents differ sharply from the treatment of religious life in the conciliar documents.

18. See Rembert G. Weakland, O.S.B., "Religious Life in the U.S. — Understanding the Moment," in *Living in the Meantime: Concerning the Transformation of Religious Life*, ed. Paul J. Philibert, O.P. (New York: Paulist Press, 1994), 209-11.

19. *LG* 43.

20. In *Vita Consecrata*, John Paul II asserts the need for religious institutes to develop a dynamic, creative fidelity to their mission, "adapting forms if need be to new situations and different needs in complete openness to God's inspiration and to the church's discernment" (*VC* 37). Canon law is one expression of the Church's ongoing discernment, a pastoral function of the hierarchy; canonical formulations articulate values, rights, and obligations in terms that are neither whimsical nor arbitrary. To serve its proper purpose, canon law must encourage a creative fidelity both to the wisdom of the past and to the fresh inspiration of the Spirit in new circumstances. Cf. *LG* 43; *MR* 8-9, 12; *EE* 4.

21. "Since the ultimate norm of the religious life is the following of Christ as it is put before us in the Gospel, this must be taken by all institutes as the supreme rule." *PC* 2a; cf. *PC* 1; *LG* 43-46.

22. Philibert, 214.

23. *PC* 3.

24. I have chosen the word "contemporary" here because, whereas the council texts speak of the "modern world," the world in which the Church has found itself during the past thirty years has been one in which modernity has been giving way to a postmodern worldview.

25. Prior to the opening of the council, when the various schemas were proposed and prepared for deliberation, there were no plans for a conciliar document on the Church's relationship to the world, and certainly not a document of the stature of a pastoral constitution.

26. *GS* 1.

27. Sandra M. Schneiders makes this point convincingly in "Contemporary Religious Life: Death or Transformation," in *Religious Life: The Challenge for Tomorrow*, ed. Cassian J. Yuhaus, C.P. (New York: Paulist Press, 1994), 18-20.

28. Karl Rahner's thesis that the real theological significance of Vatican II is its proclamation of the transition from a western or European Church to a world Church is supported by the characteristics of the postmodern global age. See Karl Rahner, "Towards a Fundamental Theological Interpretation of Vatican II," *Theological Studies* 40, no. 12 (December 1979): 716-27.

29. *ET* 18.

30. *ET* 51.

31. *GS* 4.

32. *JW* 6.

33. As *Evangelica Testificatio* points out, Christ came to respond to the cry of the poor, even going so far as to identify himself with them. As followers of Christ, religious are called to the same path. *ET* 17. Cf. Lk 4:18; 6:20; Mt 25:35-46; *LG* 8.

34. The term "preferential option for the poor" was used in relation to an understanding of religious life as recently as March 1996 in John Paul II's *Vita Consecrata* (85). Introduced at the 1979 Latin American Bishops' meeting in Puebla, Mexico (*The Final Document*, 1134), the phrase made its first appearance in John Paul II's writings in *Familiaris Consortio*, 47 (1981). The "preferential option for the poor" finds its specific roots in scripture (Jr 22:13-16; Mt 25:31-46; Lk 6:20) and in the Church's social teaching during modern times: *Rerum Novarum* 29 (1891); *Gaudium et Spes* 1 (1965); Medellín Documents: *Poverty of the Church* (1968), 9-11, 16; *Evangelica Testificatio* (1971), 18, 51; *Octogesima Adveniens* (1971), 23; *Economic Justice for All* (1986), 16, 52, 85-91; and *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (1987), 42.

35. Mk 8:35; Mt 16:25; Lk 9:24, 17:33.

36. This same emphasis is found in the other documents of Vatican II, e.g., the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* promotes the active participation of the entire assembly in the celebration of the Eucharist, highlighting the fact that it is the whole assembly that celebrates, not solely the presider. See *SC* 7, 14.

37. The renewed interest in reestablishing the "gathering space" (e.g., the courtyards of the early and medieval basilicas) as an integral part of the architectural design of new churches witnesses to this need for integration.

38. Eph 4:1-16; Ga 3:28.

39. Weakland suggests that, whereas this phenomenon has often been characterized as a blemish on religious life in the postconciliar age, it might also be considered as "a way in which religious life prepared for the life and work of the Church important new active lay members, all

very much imbued with the spirit of Vatican Council II." Thirty years later, many former religious continue to play important roles in shaping the postconciliar Church, especially in the local churches. See Rembert G. Weakland, O.S.B., "Religious Life in the U.S. — Understanding the Moment," in *Living in the Meantime: Concerning the Transformation of Religious Life*, ed. Paul J. Philibert, O.P. (New York: Paulist Press, 1994), 203.