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Continued Renewal of Apostolic Religious Life: A Transformative Model

Sister Maria Iannuccillo

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THE CONTINUED RENEWAL OF APOSTOLIC RELIGIOUS LIFE

A TRANSFORMATIVE MODEL

Master's Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty
Sacred Heart University Religious Studies Program

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts in Religious Studies

Sister Maria Iannuccillo, SSND

May, 2003
Acceptance Page

This research report is accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts in Religious Studies

Dr. Brian Stiltner, Assistant Professor of Religious Studies

May 17, 2003
Date
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Sister Maria Iannuccillo, SSND

May 17, 2003

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Sacred Heart University
Religious Studies

APPROVAL OF THE MASTER'S THESIS/PROJECT PROPOSAL

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Name of Thesis Advisor: Dr. Brian Stiltner

Title of Thesis: The Continued Renewal of Apostolic Religious Life: A Transformative Model

Student Statement: I realize that once this thesis proposal is accepted by the below listed individuals, I am expected to complete the scholarly work described in the proposal in accordance with all program requirements. Further, I understand that if my study involves human subjects, I must obtain approval from the University Institutional Review Board prior to data collection.

Student Signature

Advisor Statement: I have reviewed the enclosed proposal and find that it meets the thesis standards of the Faculty of my discipline.

Thesis Advisor

Approval:

Graduate Program Director

Chairperson, Religious Studies Department
Acknowledgements and Dedications

To all School Sisters of Notre Dame, past and present, and to those yet to come
-with gratitude and love.
Abstract

THE CONTINUED RENEWAL OF APOSTOLIC RELIGIOUS LIFE: A TRANSFORMATIVE MODEL

Religious Life in the United States has gone through a radical transition in the last thirty-eight years since the close of the Second Vatican Council. With the call of Vatican II to the renewal and updating of Religious Life, most religious congregations have been in a time of renewal, transition, and transformation. However, most religious congregations in the United States have also experienced a period of decline in the number of women entering their congregation, which raises questions about their future prospects. In response to these challenges facing Religious Life in the Catholic Church, particularly in apostolic communities in the United States, this thesis proposes the development of a transformative model of Religious Life. This model is distinguished from a radical (apart from the world), and cultural (immersed in the world) model. The thesis develops this model through three themes suggested by the decree Perfectae Caritatis from Vatican II. If apostolic congregations move more fully into a transformative model, they will not only continue to exist in the United States, but others will come and join them, revitalizing their distinct call among the People of God for years to come.
# Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PREFACE</td>
<td>viii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ONE</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TWO</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PROFOUND RECENTERING IN JESUS CHRIST</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THREE</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RECLAIMING THE CHARISM OF THE CONGREGATION</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FOUR</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SIGNS OF THE TIMES</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FIVE</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONCLUSION</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REFERENCES</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
I entered Religious Life and the School Sisters of Notre Dame (SSND) on August 28, 1990, after two years of affiliation with the congregation. I was twenty-three years old, living and working outside of Boston, MA, at the Perkins School for the Blind, and had graduated from Regis College the previous year. I understood very little of Religious Life at that time, but had a strong sense of God’s call to me to at least try it by entering the congregation. I left my job and my apartment, packed my things, and moved to New Jersey to begin a new chapter in my life.

I spent two years as a postulant, living in SSND community and working in a local school. Following the postulancy, I moved to St. Louis, Missouri for my canonical novitiate year and then to Bridgeport, Connecticut as an apostolic novice ministering in an inner city parish. I professed my first vows in 1994. As the years progressed, my studies and more importantly, my lived experience in the local and larger community has taught me many things about the life I have chosen. It was in saying “forever” in 1999, as I prepared for and made my perpetual profession, that my own commitment to God and to my congregation deepened. It is this commitment that has brought me to the topic for my thesis. I
have come to love Religious Life and especially my congregation, the School Sisters of Notre Dame, deeply and hope and pray it will always have a place in our Church and our world. I believe strongly that it is still a good and worthwhile choice for a lifestyle. My hope through my preparation, research, and writing of this thesis is that I will learn more and share what I learn about what is essential in Religious Life. My hope is that God will speak to me through this work and help me to see some direction for our future.
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Religious Life in the United States has gone through a radical transition in the last thirty-eight years since the close of Vatican Council II. This Council was called by Pope John XXIII and began in 1962 addressing many issues facing the Catholic Church. In fact, since the call of Vatican Council II to the renewal and updating of Religious Life, most religious congregations have been in a time of renewal, transition, and transformation. However, most religious congregations in the United States have also experienced a period of decline in the numbers of women entering their congregation; many women leaving their congregation, especially in the late 1960's and early 1970's; and dealing with diminishment. Religious Life has changed, especially for apostolic communities, but there is hope. The Holy Spirit is moving Religious Life in new ways. Now is the time to discover these new ways and embrace them.

This thesis is about the challenges facing Religious Life in the Catholic Church, particularly in apostolic communities in the United States. It grows in part out of my experience as a member of the School Sisters of Notre Dame as mentioned in my Preface. I will draw on that experience and the experiences of my congregation, the School Sisters of Notre Dame, as part of my research. This
thesis can be understood as a work of practical theology. I am giving a
theological reading of Religious Life, geared to practical matters of living our
Christian faith. The documents of Vatican II are a major influence on this work.
My audience is anyone interested in this topic, especially American Catholics,
and in particular members of apostolic religious communities of women.
Throughout this thesis, the communities in question will be variously referred to
as communities, congrégations, institutes, and apostolic communities, the last
term referring to religious orders in active ministry that continue the mission of
Jesus Christ. The term "Religious" can be used as a noun to refer to a member of
a religious order, a sister or brother.

Religious Life has existed for a long time, centuries, in fact. Its primary
purpose has always been to provide an atmosphere whereas a person can live a
spiritual life. Within that shared purpose many congregations throughout the
years were originally founded for a particular purpose or to address a specific
need. Some congregations were founded to educate, in general, or to educate a
group of people who were not being educated at the time. For example, a
congregation would come into being in order to educate poor children or African
American families. Other congregations established medical facilities or
hospitals, especially caring for the poor. Some congregations focused on caring
for children without parents by establishing orphanages. Other congregations
educated wealthy girls. Whatever the focus of the ministry of different
congregations, Religious Life has always first been rooted in God—a foundation
which impels the Religious sister to serve in ministry. Religious Life has also
typically involved the profession of the vows of poverty, celibacy, and obedience,
as well as the sharing of a common life and common goods.

Before Vatican II, the life of a woman Religious was highly structured. All
were expected to rise at a prescribed time; get dressed in the habit of the
community and say the dressing prayers; and then follow the daily schedule of
prayer, Mass, meals, ministry, and mandatory recreation. There was a caste
system in many communities, ranging from superior down to the youngest
member who had not yet professed final vows. There was much time for silence
and little time for talking. Despite this, a sister was in a sense never alone. She
could never travel alone but always had to be paired with a partner. The
“community chapter of faults” is a good example of both the structure and the
lack of independence. In this practice, a sister begged pardon for offenses—
usually minor, such as breaking a dish, talking during the period of grand
silence, or not saying one of the dressing prayers—from the superior in front of
the other members of the local community. The confession was followed by
public penance. In this and many other ways, the sisters’ entire lives were
structured by forces beyond their personal autonomy.
Pre-Vatican II Religious Life was also a time marked by a great flourishing in congregations. For years, the number of sisters increased reaching a high point in the 1950s in many congregations. Women Religious were called on to open schools, educate immigrants, staff orphanages, and administer hospitals. Small groups of sisters representing their particular congregation often came from Europe, invited by American bishops, to tend to the needs of the immigrants in their dioceses. And many young women from the United States joined these congregations to continue the good work of the sisters. While there was structure, there was also community living. Many communities were semi-cloistered, so the sisters spent little time outside of the convent, their ministry, and church. Sisters shared meals, prayer, Mass, and recreation every day. With the great and growing numbers in Religious Life, this time appeared to be one of thriving that no one expected to come to an end.

With the refounding call of Vatican II, which asked Religious congregations to return to their roots, much of the external structure began to change. The traditional religious garb, the habit, was modified in several stages. It went from its original floor-length, black style, and long black veil, to a tapered long dress with a shorter veil, to a suit or dress with a veil. In some cases the process culminated with a cross or pin to connote the wearer’s identification with a Religious community. For some congregations the changes in dress came
quickly, for others they came over a period of years. (Of course, some sisters still wear some variation of the habit.) Similar changes accompanied the modification of the habit. Sisters were no longer required to keep the grand silence; they could choose what Mass they wanted to attend; they were allowed to watch more on television; they no longer had the chapter of faults; they could go out of the convent alone; and so on. The closed life of the convent began to open.

As Religious congregations responded to the Council’s reaffirmation of the world as the locus of salvation and reconceptualized themselves as existing not out of or separate from the world but in, with, and for the world, they began an extensive dismantling of the structural barriers between themselves and other people and between the privatized culture of preconciliar Religious Life and the surrounding culture. At first, the primary impact of this dismantling was experienced within Religious Life itself. Dress, horaria, dwellings, community life, and ministries changed (Schneiders, p. xiii).

The following quotes are from four sisters from apostolic congregations. Their names have been changed to protect their identity. Each sister answered the following questions: How would you describe Religious Life before Vatican II? How would you describe Religious Life since Vatican II?

Sister Mary entered her congregation in 1962. She was 18. When asked about pre-Vatican II Religious Life she responded saying, “a group of women wearing unusual dresses, very devoted to God and the Church and children.” She described post-Vatican II Religious Life as “plurality in the group, having some independence, i.e. dress for ministry, still very dedicated to the search for
the mission of God, expanding attention to not only children but people of the
world.” Another sister, Sister Ann, entered at the age of 18 in 1963. She said pre-
Vatican II Religious Life was “structured, sacrifice, dress code.” She described
post-Vatican II Religious Life as “freedoms, more comfortable dress, more input
and participation of the individual sister into the workings of Religious Life,
choices and varieties of ministries.”

Sister Marie, who entered in 1939 at the age of 21, described pre-Vatican II
Religious Life saying, “uniformed, stereotyped, not much freedom, free spirit
squelched, had to find ways to break out of it, governed by rules (‘do nots’),
some superiors starting to break out of rules, superior/inferior mentality, little
input from individual sisters.” Sister Marie described post-Vatican II Religious
Life as “butterfly coming out of cocoon, make own decisions, felt free, dialogue.”
Sister Joseph, who entered in 1948 at the age of 17, said pre-Vatican II Religious
Life was “much more structured, a bit oppressive, not much freedom or
independence, actions were controlled, superiors had the last word, sisters didn’t
have too much say.” She, like the others, said things changed after Vatican II and
described post-Vatican II Religious Life as “more consultation/sharing; sisters
had more say; sisters were asked first, not just told; more freedom.”

These quotes are from four out of many sisters. However, I think they do
capture a general feeling and general memories of many sisters. They cover
different time periods with each sister speaking from her own experience. But the basic themes of their sharing, I believe, speak to the experience of many who entered Religious Life before the implementation of the call to Religious congregations from Vatican II.

It is important to remember that there were both gifts and challenges in both pre-Vatican II and post-Vatican II Religious Life. Before Vatican II, Religious Life was a rooted in the prayers of the Church and the traditions of the congregation. A sense of community was palpable, and corporate ministry and corporate witness were the strengths of this model. Yet there was little regard for the individual. Little thought was given to creating an environment in which diverse gifts and opinions could flourish and build up the community. Post-Vatican II Religious Life has moved to a great respect for the individual, for her needs and wants. The current environment gives the individual Religious many opportunities for spiritual growth and the opportunity to serve in just about any ministry to which she feels called. Sisters have had many opportunities to develop their spiritual life, there has been a reclaiming of the spirituality of the founder/foundress, and there has been a growth in the variety of prayer experiences. For example, a sister before Vatican II might have been required to attend a retreat at her motherhouse given by a priest retreat master. In more recent times, a sister is often free to choose her own retreat. This might be a
retreat directed by a lay woman trained in spiritual direction, or it might be a retreat on Celtic or Native American spirituality. Undoubtedly, these opportunities can benefit not only the individual sister but her community.

Yet this environment of respect and personalized ministry has also contributed to individualistic ways. There is less structured prayer and less corporate witness. Many sisters are living alone or with only one other sister. Sandra M. Schneiders, IHM, refers to this dramatic transition as the "dismantling" of Religious Life.

This dismantling called for revisions of constitutions, and from that followed changes in internal structures, institutional involvements, and relationships within and outside the congregation. Foundational to these observable changes, of course, was a new theology and a rapidly evolving spirituality, but it was the breakdown of the total institution that precipitated what was to follow (Schneiders, p. xiii).

The dismantling of Religious Life and the call for renewal have offered many new opportunities to women Religious. Yet it is not clear if it has all been for the good. In terms of numbers, Religious Life continues to decline. In fact, despite all the updating and increase in opportunities for women Religious, very few young women, at least in the United States, are choosing to enter congregations. Not only does this decline threaten the congregations, but it means that there is an entire generation of young Catholics that is very unfamiliar with Religious Life, with who sisters are and what they do. In a way, the closed, structured, dependent, yet flourishing Religious Life of the 1950s has
given way to an open, flexible, independent, yet declining Religious Life. The closed life of the convent opened, and necessarily so, yet maybe Religious Life moved to the opposite extreme—so open that it has no distinctive resources for its continued vitality.

In talking about this sobering picture, it is necessary to keep an open mind. Some Catholics with either traditional or progressive agendas see a message they are already disposed to see in the facts. But the picture is complex. Some congregations have young and not-so-young women entering. Some congregations have women entering in other countries, such as India, and these sisters are being sent to the United States to live and minister. Strong evidence is still lacking to prove that more traditional congregations have new members. Some traditional and some liberal congregations have new members and some do not.

Yet there is no doubting many apostolic congregations of women find themselves in a period of decline and diminishment. In 1963, there were 6,752 School Sisters of Notre Dame in North America. In 1968, there were 7,087 SSNDs in North America. In 1979, there were 5,257 SSNDs in North America. (Statistics from the Wilton Province of the School Sisters of Notre Dame Archives) Congregations have many older sisters and few, if any, younger members.
Following is an example from my congregation of some statistics for our sisters in more recent years in North America.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total number of sisters</th>
<th>Sisters under 70 years</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>3,744</td>
<td>2,218</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>2,738</td>
<td>1,350</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011*</td>
<td>1,747</td>
<td>355</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

*projected (SSND NAMA Sponsorship Conference)

The median age of sisters is often in the late sixties. Older sisters are retiring from ministry and there is no other sister to replace them. Institutions staffed by congregations are being handed over to lay directors and boards. Schools staffed by the same congregation for years no longer have even one sister in ministry there. Buildings are being sold, convents are empty. Given the present statistics and the obvious decline in membership, something has to change if Religious Life is going to survive in the United States. In my own congregation, twelve elderly sisters have died in the last nine months. There are more and more empty tables in the dining room. There is no sister to replace another sister leaving a position held by the congregation for years. Something has to change.

It is a stark reality. Some say Religious Life is dying, or worse, that it is already dead. In addition, Vatican II and its implementation are often blamed for the decline in numbers. But I disagree with this assessment, both in its simplicity and its pessimism. Vatican II is a source of great inspiration for the renewal of
Religious Life. I affirm many of the developments in Religious Life that emerged after the Council. The challenge is that the improvements seem to carry problems on their flip side. So our question could be phrased as: Do we have to choose between a stress on an overly structured community or unstructured individualism in Religious Life? No—I will show a third way. I believe the call from God to apostolic women Religious in the 21st century is to refound Religious Life and to recapture the heart of who we are as women Religious, as sisters committed to God and each other. I find this call filled with possibilities and hope for our future. I propose that Religious Life, at least for apostolic communities of women in the United States, is not dead or dying, but in a period of stripping down and transformation. If we are faithful to this process and to God’s call to us during it, we will not only survive, but emerge with new life.

Is God calling us to a period of transformation? Is God calling us to look even deeper into the call of Vatican II to refound? Maybe God is asking us to pray and reflect on who we are as women Religious, what makes our call different and unique, and how are we called in these times to share our particular charism and spread the Gospel of Jesus Christ. This transformation and refounding might call us to new ventures, ministries, community living, and styles of prayer. It might bring us to clarity about our life and unique call within the Church and society. It asks us to go deeply into our heart and find God and
God's desire for us there. This transformation and refounding asks us to share what we find with each other, our sisters in community, so we can come to some sense of God's call to us. And this transformation and refounding will call us to act. Once we have a sense of God's call we will have a responsibility to act, to change, to grow, to refound and pass on to another generation the gift of Religious Life.

Clearly something changed starting with Vatican II. In order to understand the external and internal changes in Religious Life, as well as the possibilities of renewal, we need to understand the Council's vision of the Church and what the Council taught about Religious Life. On October 11, 1962, the first session of Vatican II was held in Saint Peter's Basilica in Rome. The work of the Council continued over four years, with meetings in Rome in the autumn of 1962, 1963, 1964, and 1965. Much of the work was done during the year by conciliar commissions (Flannery, p. xi). The central focus of the Council was an "updating" (aggiornamento, in Pope John XXIII's memorable Italian phrase) of the Church—not by taking its cues from the contemporary culture but by looking to Jesus Christ as the foundation of the Church. The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (Lumen Gentium), expressed the focus in this way:

Christ is the light of the nations and consequently this holy synod, gathered together in the holy Spirit, ardently desires to bring all humanity that light of Christ which is resplendent on the face of the church, by proclaiming his Gospel to every creature. Since the church, in Christ, is a
sacrament – a sign and instrument, that is, of communion with God and of the unity of the entire human race – it here proposes, for the benefit of the faithful and of the entire world, to describe more clearly, and in the tradition laid down by earlier council, its own nature and universal mission (Lumen Gentium, no. 1).

As the Council tried to better explain the Church and bring clarity to its call and place in the world, it also attempted to begin to clarify the role of Religious Life within the Church. The Decree on the Up-to-date Renewal of Religious Life, known by its Latin title Perfectae Caritatis, was promulgated on October 28, 1965. This decree, one of the basic documents of Vatican II, offered a definition of Religious Life and issued challenges to all Religious women and men all over the world (Perfectae Caritatis, no. 1).

The decree first places Religious Life in its original context, not for a history lesson, but to show a pattern that has animated Religious Life ever since. Perfectae Caritatis referred to Religious Life being part of the Church from its earliest times where there were women and men who attempted to follow Christ more freely and to imitate him more closely by practicing the “evangelical counsels.” The evangelical counsels are the practices of poverty, celibacy, and obedience in imitation of Jesus. They are evangelical because they come from the gospels; they are counsels because they are recommendations for an optional form of life—the life of a consecrated Religious. In different ways, each Religious
order and each member of Religious congregations led a life dedicated to God

(Perfectae Caritatis, no. 1).

Many of them, under the inspiration of the holy Spirit, became hermits or founded religious families, which the Church, by virtue of its authority, gladly accepted and approved. Thus, in keeping with the divine purpose, a wonderful variety of religious communities came into existence. This has helped considerably to equip the Church for every good work and for ministry aimed at building up the body of Christ. It has also enabled it to display the assorted gifts of its sons and daughters, like a bride adorned for her husband, and to manifest in itself the manifold wisdom of God. (Perfectae Caritatis, no. 1, internal references deleted)

Amid such a great variety of gifts, all those who are called by God to the practice of the evangelical counsels, and who make faithful profession of them, bind themselves to the Lord in a special way. They follow Christ virginal and poor who, by obedience unto death on the cross, redeemed humanity and made it holy. Under the impulse of love, which the Holy Spirit pours into their hearts, they live more and more for Christ and for his body, the church. The more fervently, therefore, they join themselves to Christ by this gift of their entire life, the fuller does the church's life become and the more vigorous and fruitful its apostolate. (Perfectae Caritatis, no. 1, internal references deleted)

This quote shows the variety of gifts, service to the Church, and unity in Christ. These are keys to the authentic expression of Religious Life in any cultural or historical context. Through the document of Perfectae Caritatis, the Church invited Religious congregations of women and men to renew and refound their life. The decree listed five principles or norms that were and are central to this renewal:

a. 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 (no. 2a).

b. It is to the church’s advantage that each institute has its own proper character and function. Therefore the spirit and aims of each founder should be faithfully acknowledged and maintained, as indeed should each institute’s sound traditions, for all of these constitute an institute’s heritage (no. 2b).

c. All institutes should share in the life of the church. They should make their own and should promote to the best of their ability, each in a manner suited to its own character, the church’s initiatives and undertakings in biblical, liturgical, dogmatic, pastoral, ecumenical, missionary and social matters (no. 2c).

d. Institutes should see to it that their members have a proper understanding of people, of the contemporary situation and of the needs of the church, this to the end that, evaluating the contemporary world wisely in the light of faith, and fired with apostolic zeal, they may be helpful to people (no. 2d).

e. Before all else, Religious Life is ordered to the following of Christ by its members and to their becoming united with God by the profession of the evangelical counsels. For this reason it has been accepted that even the best-contrived adaptations to the needs of our time will be of no avail unless they are animated by a spiritual renewal, which must always be assigned primary importance even in the development of the active ministry (no. 2e).

I have distilled from these five principles three themes that must animate the renewal of Religious Life:

1. Religious Life must be profoundly recentered in Jesus Christ, which entails that a congregation and its members radically live the Gospel.

2. The congregation must study and reclaim its founding charism, while creatively and consistently applying it to new circumstances.
3. Religious Life in all its dimensions must respond to “the signs of the
times.”

These three themes will provide the framework for the body of this thesis. One
problem that confronts us at the outset is how to apply such themes. They are
broad in scope and widely affirmed in the Catholic community. Thus anyone
proposing any suggestion for Religious Life will claim to be guided by the
principle of following Jesus—as well she should. The challenge is to say what
counts as a better application of these themes. What applications respect the
animating spirit and purposes of Religious Life and will best serve the Church in
the centuries ahead? To answer these questions I will filter these themes through
three models of Christianity (in general) and Religious Life (in particular) as
described by Paul Philibert, OP, in his article “Toward a Transformative Model
of Religious Life.” I will focus on the interpretation of these themes from *Perfectae
Caritatis* through the models described by Philibert in relation to Religious Life.*

For Philibert, Radical Religious Life flees the world and its culture
choosing another worldly salvation. Those in this form of Religious Life desire to
restore the immigrant Catholic subculture. They are considered to be

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*Philibert bases his interpretation on H. Richard Niebuhr’s models of Christianity taken from
*Christ and Culture*. Niebuhr has five models: Christ Against Culture; The Christ of Culture; Christ
Above Culture; Christ and Culture in Paradox; and Christ the Transformer of Culture (Niebuhr,
pp. vii-viii). Philibert discusses three models of Religious Life: Radical (Christ Against Culture),
Cultural (The Christ of Culture), and Transformative. He collapses three of Niebuhr’s
transformative models: Christ Above Culture, Christ and Culture in Paradox, and Christ the
Transformer of Culture into one transformative model (Philibert, p. 10).*
restorationists and favor “going back to how it used to be,” authoritarian leadership, and institutional prayer (DiIanni). Although this model is typical of pre-Vatican II Religious Life, some still choose it now in our post-Vatican II Church. They are labeled as ultraconservatives, whether young or old chronologically. This model promotes order and uniformity through authority, law, and predictable expressions of tradition. This model tends to promote a separation from the world — a world that is seen as denying the Gospel. There is a definite separation of Gospel and culture and a tendency to use “either/or” terms, for example, either Gospel or culture. In this model, “Religious Life is understood as shaped by the defining norms and obligations of cloister, rule, religious habits and obedience to religious authority” (Philibert, p. 10).

One of the dynamics of radical Religious Life had been the tendency to infantalize the moral experience of adults. Put another way, no matter what one’s age, experience or intellect, religious were treated by superiors like children. Vatican II came along and insisted on the moral autonomy of Christians, on the participation by all in public life, on the responsibility to read the signs of the times. The council spoke of a new age of history, with rapid change influencing every aspect of human experience, and called for a transformation of Christian response to the world. Needless to say, those who rankled under the pressures of radical culture found warrant here to break loose (Philibert, p. 11, internal references deleted).

Therefore, Cultural Religious Life involves those who live in a post-Vatican II Church. They embrace the world and its culture and let the world set the agenda. They desire to escape the immigrant Catholic subculture. They favor functional prayer and have made achievements in social justice areas (DiIanni).
They have promoted an awareness that justice involves just social structures and the reformation of the social order. In many cases, they have modified and eventually cast off the religious habit, returning to secular clothing. There was more active participation by members in the government of the religious congregation, decision making, and in the reduction of the separation between religious culture and the general culture. In general, congregations of women Religious took hold of the invitations of Vatican II and were willing to experiment with them (Philibert, p. 11).

Philibert (drawing on H. Richard Niebuhr’s transformative models of relating Christ and culture) described the “middle position” as that in which the church seeks to transform the world. Thus, Philibert’s transformative model of Religious Life is realistic and sees the culture engaged by the Gospel. “It recognizes the problems with an unconverted world, but also recognizes that the transformation of the world into a sacrament of the kingdom of God is the meaning of the church” (Philibert, p. 12).

Philibert suggests that we are at an important frontier for the Church, since we have gotten lost between a preconciliar and postconciliar moment:

Radical religious have appeared to have gotten lost in the paraphernalia of their alternative world and become defensive about the relevance of their traditional approach to the consecrated life. Culture-centered religious appear to have gotten lost in their advocacy of apostolic endeavors and dropped the thread of witness to a privileged experience of communities
seeking to sacramentalize together the church's intimacy with God, who calls us into anointed silence (Philibert, p. 12).

Father Albert Dilanni, SM, in a presentation to Religious women and men, shared some of the following reflections on Religious Life using Philibert's models. Transformative Religious Life involves those who engage the world and try to transform or convert it in accord with the Gospel values. They have never experienced the immigrant subculture. They tend toward an evangelical approach to address the pluralistic world in which we live. This evangelical approach is characterized by (a) personal conversion and (b) public witness. The young religious are not restorationists but evangelical. They want to tell their own story of personal conversion and want to witness publicly to their faith in Christ and the Transcendent. Transformative Religious are of more recent times. They don't want to restore the past but do see challenges in post-Vatican II Religious Life. They want to take, to reclaim the best of Religious Life. They favor contemplative prayer: to sit before the Lord together or alone in silence. They favor some type of habit to be worn at appropriate times, for example during liturgical and prayer times, in ministry, and at community times, but not during recreation. They favor community, not the living of a solitary life together, but living together and some shared faith life (Dilanni).

Fr. Dilanni's presentation is helpful because it begins to show what a transformative model would look like in practice. But how do we know, for
example, what form of dress is apt? Does it really matter? Or is it about how the
decision is made? There are many questions, but the three themes can help us
develop answers. What’s clear is that transformation is imperative. Therefore, I
believe that if Apostolic Religious Life for women is going to survive in the
United States of America, we, women Religious, must move into a
transformative model of Religious Life. It is no longer an option. It is imperative.
It is for our survival. More importantly, such a move best responds to our call to
live radically the Gospel of Jesus Christ in our times.

The following chapters will explore in greater depth the three themes
from *Perfectae Caritatis*: profound recentering in Jesus Christ which entails a
radical living of the Gospel, the study and reclaiming of the charism of the
congregation, and responding to the signs of the times. The last chapter will
bring the thesis to conclusion by summarizing the outlines of a transformative
model of Religious Life for apostolic congregations of women in the United
States as the model emerges throughout this thesis.
CHAPTER 2

PROFOUND RECENTERING IN JESUS CHRIST

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—Perfectae Caritatis.

PROFOUND RECENTERING IN JESUS CHRIST

One of the most dramatic calls of Vatican II to those in Religious Life was for a profound recentering in Jesus Christ, which entails a radical living of the Gospel. How do Religious profoundly recenter in Jesus Christ? How do we radically live the Gospel? In this chapter, I will consider these questions in turn.

The members of every institute, therefore, ought to seek God, and God alone, before all else; they should join contemplation, by which they cleave to God by mind and heart, to apostolic love, by which they endeavor to be identified with the work of redemption and the spread of the kingdom of God (Perfectae Caritatis, no. 5).

Religious must seek God, and God alone, before all else. Perfectae Caritatis, commands, therefore, that “they should join contemplation. “ For Religious, it is the seeking of God that is first and foremost. It is this always searching for our Triune God that does and must focus the life of any Religious. Sandra M. Schneiders, IHM, speaks of this search for God as a God-quest. She says:
Religious organize life around the God-quest. It is not simply that they attempt to do whatever they do ‘in the name of the Lord Jesus,’ to find and to honor God in all things and to do nothing incompatible with their commitment to God. This is true of all committed believers for whom God is the meaning-given horizon for all of life. Rather, for Religious the God-quest determines directly, immediately, and primarily all the choices and elements of their life itself even in its day-to-day and hour-to-hour reality. It controls who Religious live with and where, what work they choose to do, how they handle money, their daily schedule and its activities, and every other aspect of their life (Schneiders, pp. 229-230).

This search for God—the God-quest—is at the center of life for Religious. And so the call of Vatican II through the documents of *Perfectae Caritatis* is clear:

Religious must be centered and must recenter their life in Jesus Christ. This means that we know that without God, we are nothing. It means that we know that God is everything. It means that God directs our entire life. It means that each day we recenter in Jesus Christ. It means that we pray.

Until Vatican II, the prayer of Religious in community was often marked by tradition, what we might call structured prayer. There was the praying of the Divine Office, in community. There was time for meditation, often in community. There was the gathering of the community for the daily Celebration of the Eucharist. Since Vatican II, many congregations have shifted from gathering for the praying of the Divine Office to some other type of “functional prayer,” as Philibert refers to in his explanation of his models of Religious Life. This functional prayer adapts to whatever the present need or theme might be at the time. It is one of the elements in Philibert’s Cultural Religious Life.
In describing the transformative model of Religious Life, Philibert suggests that it is marked by contemplation. Transformative Religious Life does not reject traditional prayer and the rich tradition of prayer in our Church. Neither does it reject openness to varied prayer experiences responding to a need or theme. Transformative Religious Life does, however, place the need, call, and desire for contemplation as a critical element. Contemplation, whether in a communal or individual form (and both are necessary) is a call from Vatican II and is essential in the life of a Religious. We can pray in many ways at different times, but the call for Transformative Religious is to contemplate Jesus Christ alone and together. This call to contemplation invites the Religious to sit silently in the presence of God, to empty herself and open herself to the Word of God. This contemplation can open us, change us, lead us, transform us. This contemplation can call us to new action.

Sister Mary Maher, SSND, a theologian, spoke on the occasion of her installation as Provincial Leader of the Northeastern Province of the School Sisters of Notre Dame. She reminded us, School Sisters of Notre Dame, and all others present, of the call of our present General Chapter to go deeper, to return to the wellspring of our life—Jesus Christ and his Gospel. She reminded us of the invitation to contemplate the experience of the Samaritan women in the Gospel of John. She invited us to “fall in love again” (Maher, “Love Again,” p.
3). This is an example of the call for a profound recentering in Jesus Christ. The call to Religious Life presupposes an encounter with Jesus Christ. The life of a Religious presumes that one is engaged in an ongoing relationship with Jesus Christ. But the call of Vatican II and our present reality invites all Religious to recenter, to go deeper, to contemplate Jesus Christ and his Gospel in new and deeper ways. It is an invitation to discover God’s call to us today. Let me explain the contours of that call through some biblical examples that inform it.

Maher speaks of the Samaritan woman (Jn 4, 1-42) who has an encounter with Jesus. She is a woman, a Samaritan. He is a Jewish man. Jews and Samaritans did not share with each other. He meets her at a well and asks for a drink. He offers her living water. He knows her, all of her goodness and sinfulness. He sees into her. She is never the same. She sees something in him, something she cannot help but proclaim. And all has changed for her. In an ordinary moment of an ordinary day, in a single encounter with Jesus Christ, all is made new.

Isn’t that the story of Religious? An encounter with Jesus Christ—at some moment, over many moments, has moved us, called us, changed us. An encounter with Jesus called us to live out our Baptism as consecrated Religious. Encounters over the years have continued to call us to go to new places, meet new people, do things we didn’t think we could do, accept change and
sufferings, realize God’s many gifts to us. Encounters over the years have
deepened our spirituality, our love for Jesus and for Jesus’ people. So now,
transformative Religious Life, at this critical time in the history of Religious Life,
invites us to contemplate Jesus Christ. Vatican II calls Religious to contemplation.
Anything is possible when we contemplate Jesus Christ and his Gospel.
Anything is possible when we encounter Jesus. Anything is possible when we
fall in love, like we did at that first encounter with Jesus Christ. Anything is
possible when we fall in love again. Schneiders writes:

> The work of Religious is to seek God with the whole of their being and
> life, to pursue that quest wherever it leads, and to do so to the exclusion of
> any other primary life commitment or work (Schneiders, p. 338).

**A RADICAL FOLLOWING OF JESUS CHRIST**

Sister Patricia Flynn, SSND, former General Superior of the School Sisters
of Notre Dame, offered some reflections to approximately 100 SSNDs gathered at
a symposium on vocation ministry in June of 2002. She said:

> I also sense that the fewer vocations has been a gift—hasn’t it impelled us
to look at how we witness to the joys and challenges of following Christ?
The probing of why and what to do is stimulating growth in us, moving
us more consciously into the future, and is making demands on us—to
change our lives (Flynn).

It is this following of Christ, this response to Jesus Christ’s call to radically
live his Gospel that flows out of a profound recentering in him. Flynn quotes
from “Starting Afresh from Christ,” a recent Vatican document on Religious Life.
In some places consecrated persons become 'little flocks' because of a decrease in numbers, this can be seen as a providential sign which invites them to their very essential task of being leaven, sign, and prophecy.

While we need to look at our present statistics and what they say to us, we also cannot let those statistics keep us from engaging in whatever and wherever God calls us. This call may come as the refounding of Religious Life. It may come as a new ministry. It may come as a call to speak out in our words and actions against injustice. It may come as a call to witness to multicultural community life. This is not to say these calls are not already present. It is to say that maybe some are new or maybe we are just hearing them again, maybe in different ways, or maybe with new ears.

We can again look to the Scriptures to understand the essence of this principle. The Gospels call us to radical discipleship. Jesus calls the first disciples and they abandon boat, nets, and their father to follow him (Mt 4, 18-22). Jesus tells the disciples they are the salt of the earth and the light of the world. He says their light must shine before all so that others will see goodness in their acts and give praise to our heavenly Father (Mt 5, 13-16). When the rich, young man asks Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life, Jesus first reminds him of the commandments and then instructs him to sell what he has and give to the poor, and then to follow him (Mk 10, 17-22). In the story of the good Samaritan Jesus calls us to treat our brothers and sisters with compassion (Lk 10, 25-37). At the
Last Supper, Jesus washes his disciples' feet and calls them to do the same for each other (Jn 13, 1-17). At Pentecost Jesus sends the Holy Spirit to always be with them and to help them to preach the Good News of Jesus Christ (Jn 20, 19-23 and Acts 2, 1-12). Jesus' invitation is a strong one. He asks us to give up everything and to follow him wherever that may take us; to witness goodness; to let the gifts God has given us shine through for all to see; to witness to our love for God; to serve others with compassion; to care for the poor among us; and to bend down and wash the feet of our neighbor.

Jesus' call was and is comprehensive, since every area of a disciple's life is touched, and since it calls a disciple to conversion from self-interested ways. In both ways that call—and Jesus' example of how to live it—are radical. Here, "radical" is in contrast with Philibert's use of radical in referring to ultraconservative Religious. Rather, radical means, according to its etymology, "going to the root"—the root of the disciple's life. Jesus is radical in that he challenges much of religious law and tradition. For example, he focuses on the spirit of the law rather than the letter of the law. He called his disciples and calls all of us to radical discipleship, but he too was radical in the way he lived and preached the Kingdom of God. Jesus tells us clearly of the greatest commandment:

The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul,
and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these (Mk 12, 28-34).

He also says to us:

A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men (people) will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another (Jn 13, 31-35).

A few more Gospel examples illustrate the implications of radical discipleship. One of the most compelling stories in the Gospel for me is the cure of the woman with the hemorrhage (Mk 5, 25-34). Not only was she a woman speaking up to a Jewish man who was not her husband, but she was an unclean woman because she had been bleeding for twelve years. She must have been sick, weak. She must have been an outcast in their society after bleeding for so long. Others must have wondered what she or her parents’ sin was to cause such a punishment. She believed that if she could just touch the cloak of Jesus she would be healed. She did so, Jesus felt the power leave him, and the blood dried up. Not only did Jesus heal this woman, but he restored her place in society.

What did people think of a Jewish man healing an unclean woman? What was Jesus’ message? Maybe he was telling everyone it was more important to care for the sick, for someone who had been cast aside then to be overly caught up in the Jewish laws of cleanliness and impurity. Another example is the story of the woman caught in adultery (Jn 7, 53-8, 11). The law said she was to be stoned to
death. The scribes and Pharisees brought the woman to Jesus to see what he
would do. He turns the situation back to them asking who has not sinned. They
walk away without stoning her. Jesus not only saves her life, but shows her
compassion and forgiveness and instructs her to stop her sinful ways. This
encounter changes her life. Are we not called to try to do the same for our
brothers and sisters who find themselves in some kind of bondage? A final
example is Jesus' account of the Last Judgment (Mt 25, 31-46), in which he tells us
of our call to feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, welcome the stranger,
clothe the naked, comfort the ill, and visit those in prison. He reminds us that
when we do this for one of our least brothers or sisters, we do it for him.

So then, what does a radical following and living of the Gospels entail for
Religious? We have seen through this chapter and its biblical stories two
mutually sustaining movements: "going within" (contemplating God in Christ)
and "going out" (radical service). Under this double paradigm, Religious Life
means reaching out to those who might be cast aside. It means seeking the lost,
befriending the friendless, finding the persons who have fallen through the
cracks. It means educating others academically, socially, and spiritually. It means
speaking out against injustice in our world and in our Church. It means
proclaiming that all life is sacred—all life, from new life to life facing the death
penalty. It means seeking the truth and being willing to stand up for it, even if
that stance is unpopular. It means letting go, trusting God totally, surrendering to God, giving everything to God. It means sacrifice. It means living simply. It means witnessing to the joy of being a Religious and of spreading the Good News of Jesus Christ. It means leaving mother and father and sister and brother and friend to follow Jesus. It means laying down our nets and picking up whatever net God wants us to cast. It means falling into God and letting God be God and lead us. It means being part of a congregation and of a community of sisters living together. It means sharing all in common.

The above statements are susceptible to being called vague or applicable to almost anyone’s prescription for Religious Life, so I will return to the transformative model to sharpen it. The transformative model of Religious Life sees Religious having an evangelical approach to the world. They try to engage the world and transform it through Gospel values. Personal conversion and public witness are characteristic of this evangelical approach. Transformative Religious want to share their story of their own conversion as well as witness publicly to their faith in Jesus Christ (DiIanni).

Maybe transformative Religious are called to search for the areas of unmet needs. Most apostolic congregations were founded to meet a particular need. Many were founded in order to educate—women, immigrant children, and poor families. Some orders were founded to minister to a particular population—
Native Americans, African-Americans, and Europeans who immigrated to the United States. I believe Religious did preach the Good News through each particular congregation and ministry. Many congregations, while still keeping their initial focus like education or hospital ministry, have moved into a wide variety of ministries. This can bring its own richness but it can also move a congregation away from its original founding.

I do not propose that all congregations need to go back to whatever the original founding ministry was whenever they were founded. In many cases that would not be practical. I do propose, however, that congregations seriously look at the present needs like our founders/foundresses did years ago. Where are the unmet needs? Who are the outcasts? Who has been cast aside? Who are the poorest of the poor? Who are the hungry for food and spiritual nourishment? Who is without opportunities for betterment of self and family? Who has been put down by society? Who is oppressed in the United States and our world? This approach, this transformative model, could be quite challenging. It could move many of us out of our comfort zone. It could call us to new and unknown places. But isn’t that what it means to follow Jesus and radically live his Gospel?

For transformative Religious, a radical following of Jesus Christ is closely associated with ministry and how Religious serve in ministry. It means being engaged in ministry, meeting the needs, but also doing so in a way that always
shares the Good News of Jesus Christ. For transformative Religious, a radical following of Jesus Christ always includes the witness of their own personal conversion and the public witness of their faith in Jesus Christ. Transformative Religious are not removed from the world and the present culture as are radical Religious. Neither are they totally immersed in the world and its present culture as are cultural Religious. Radical Religious overly stress "going within" while cultural Religious overly stress "going out." Transformative Religious are part of the world and its present culture, but try to transform the world and culture through Gospel values.

All Christians are called to live the Gospel messages of Jesus Christ, but Religious are called in a particular way to radically live his Gospel. And so, as we are centered in Jesus Christ and continue to grow in and into that relationship, we are called in new and radical ways to live his Gospel.
CHAPTER 3

RECLAIMING THE CHARISM OF THE CONGREGATION

It is to the Church's advantage that each institute has its own proper character and function. Therefore the spirit and aims of each founder should be faithfully acknowledged and maintained, as indeed should each institute's sound traditions, for all of these constitute an institute's heritage—Perfectae Caritatis.

Traditions and Practices

I recently had the opportunity to visit with one of the sisters in my province. As I arrived at her room, she was in the process of cleaning out and going through many items in her desk. As we were talking, she came across a small pouch. The pouch was obviously handmade and had the initials JMJ sown on the front. I asked her about this little pouch. She told me she was required to make it when she was a postulant, some forty years ago, and that the letters stood for Jesus, Mary, and Joseph. I had already guessed the meaning of the letters but did not realize the value of the pouch. She said each postulant wore the pouch pinned to her habit at reception to the novitiate and at the profession of first vows. Inside her pouch were two letters, one for each occasion, each written to her spouse, Jesus. She shared the letters with me. Each letter spoke of her desire to offer herself totally to Jesus for service to him and his people. Each letter also contained special intentions. Other sisters tell me they were
encouraged to carry their special intentions with them all the time and especially at significant ceremonies, in their scapular bag. This is one tradition that has been lost, but its meaning has been carried forward.

As I prepared to profess my final vows, one sister told me briefly about this tradition. I found it to hold significance as she explained it to me. I decided that at my profession, although I would not make a special pouch, I would carry with me on that most significant of days in my life, a list of petitions. I did this and found it a meaningful and symbolic way of carrying those special people and special intentions with me as I professed my final vows. While this might not be meaningful for everyone, I do believe it is one tradition that holds special significance. There are many others.

Sisters talk about the recitation of clothing prayers each day. They were told this is what you say as you get dressed. They tell me the prayers held meaning but the meaning was often lost because of the requirement to pray them each day. When a sister was received into the novitiate, her hair was cut and a lock of it given to her mother, and she received a new name. This symbolized her new life in Christ. Likewise, when a sister took her vows, a black pall was placed over her, symbolizing she was dead to the world.

Some may say these traditions were cruel or out of touch or lacked meaning. I would say that they reflected the theology of Religious Life at one
time in its history. I would also argue that maybe the meaning of these symbolic actions was important and has been lost. While women Religious are not dead to the world nor have they lost themselves and who they are as persons, they, we have said yes to God’s call and taken up a very specific call and role within our Church and our world.

I believe more and more that so many of the traditions passed on for so many years became institutionalized and often lost their deeper meaning. For example, it is quite possible and probable that the foundress of my congregation, Blessed Theresa of Jesus Gerhardinger, carried intentions with her at all times, always in her heart and probably written on a small piece of paper. I can imagine this simple, yet meaningful practice being shared and passed down to new sisters. I can also see how that practice could become a “requirement” over the years as Religious Life became institutionalized. While it is a meaningful practice, it becomes required or strongly encouraged and new sisters might not even know why.

Another example might be as follows. I was at a full day retreat a number of years ago. The sister who led the retreat was suggesting to the retreatants ways to bring God into the ordinary events of every day. Her example was every time you stop at a red light, instead of getting upset because of lost time; use it as a moment to talk with God. I thought that was a wonderful idea. However, if we
translate that to Religious Life, what was a wonderful suggestion could become a required practice without anyone knowing why.

Of course, there might be some traditions that were no longer appropriate for the times or had drifted away from the origins of the intention and meaning. Some traditions, like the chapter of faults mentioned in Chapter One, could be seen as public humiliation as well as penance. Maybe this practice is better left in the past. Maybe we have lost many rich traditions and practices. I suggest we reclaim what has meaning. Over a year ago I was at a liturgical celebration at our motherhouse. The chapel was full with our sisters and women who had left our congregation some years before. At one point in the celebration we sang the Magnificat, Mary’s prayer of praise to God. It was in Latin and the Chapel was filled, immediately, with a beautiful sound in four parts. I stopped trying to sing and just took in that moment. I realized as they sang, something of our rich tradition was passing. My sisters had learned this Magnificat long ago. The numbers alone in those days provided a choir. This was no longer the case. My generation in Religious Life is much smaller and we were never taught the Magnificat in four parts. That is just the way it is but I found a sadness in me as I realized this rich tradition and beautiful way to praise our God might be known only in the past.
I believe a transformative model of Religious Life looks at the history of the congregation, its traditions, its deep beliefs, and tries to discern what holds deep meaning for the sister and the congregation. It does not say: do this because I said so. It does say: this is significant for us, this holds great meaning, let me share this with you and pass it on to the next generation. Transformative Religious Life tries to identify and reclaim that which holds meaning and significance for the group.

Heritage and Charism

As with any family, each religious congregation has its own history. Its history tells us of its roots: where it came from, its country of origin, who was instrumental in its beginnings, who else helped to establish it, and something of its purpose and spirit. Every congregation of women, and there are many, has a particular history and story to tell. Some began from the same founder/foundress and eventually branched off in different geographical areas. Others saw a specific need and formed to meet that need. Some congregations are international with units all over the world. Others are diocesan or local. Both international and diocesan congregations often have mission countries where they send sisters for ministry.
Each congregation has its own charism or spirit and foundation of beliefs. While such a charism may be similar to that of another congregation, charisms do separate one congregation from another. Schneiders defines charism as follows. “A charism is a grace given for the sake not only of the recipient but also and primarily for the upbuilding of the Church” (p. 283). The following definition is taken from Catholic Dictionary.

Charismata or Charisms: Our English word “charism” is from the Greek charisma(ta), which refers to a “free gift.” The term has both a non-technical and a technical sense to it. At a non-technical level, charismata refers to spiritual gifts in general, eternal life, or answers to prayers. Charismata are special gifts which, as service directed to the Lord, manifest the work of God through the Holy Spirit all for the common good of the body of believers, the Church. This “work of God” includes a myriad of behaviors, and especially a knowledge of God. The gifts always point to the giver; their authentic use in the Church is a fulfillment of God’s work initiated in the Old Testament (Catholic Dictionary, p. 127, internal references deleted).

It is the charism that helps to identify the congregation of women Religious. Of course, Religious congregations are part of the Catholic Church and therefore are rooted in the teachings and traditions of the Church which is part of their identity. Many friends and members of my family have asked me how I chose the School Sisters of Notre Dame instead of another congregation. My response has always been: witness, invitation, and feeling at home. I was struck by the witness of the sisters, their desire for God and to do God’s will, and their humanness. I found them to be real, happy, and committed to God and each
other. Next, one, then other sisters, let me know that they saw something in me and that I might have a call to Religious Life. They invited me to join them. Finally, I felt more and more at home with School Sisters of Notre Dame and I began to realize that their charism resonated with me and had found a place in my heart. So I responded at first to the congregation’s charism in the non-technical sense that the community was charismatic, attractive, and spiritually engaging. Acting on this response led me to a deeper investigation of the congregation’s charism in the technical sense of its works and mission.

In order to explain heritage and charism in more depth, I will share some of the history and charism of my congregation. The following account is based on the Constitution and General Directory of the School Sisters of Notre Dame, You Are Sent (1986) and the biography, Mary Theresa of Jesus Gerhardinger, A Woman Led by the Lord (1985).

The Congregation of the School Sisters of Notre Dame was founded in Bavaria, Germany, on October 24, 1833. Although several people had the vision and influence in the foundation of our congregation, it was Caroline Gerhardinger who founded this new congregation of women. She was 36 and with two other women began the first common Religious Life of the School Sisters of Notre Dame in Neunburg vorm Wald, Bavaria, Germany. The government had closed many Christian schools, including the one Caroline
Gerhardinger attended. Caroline, along with two other young women, agreed to be educated as teachers and to teach in the now parish school. This eventually led to her call from God to found the Poor School Sisters of Notre Dame. They decided that their call was the Christian education of girls, especially poor girls in small towns and villages. They believed if you educate a mother you can change the world (You Are Sent, pp. 122-124).

Of great influence in this call was Father Michael Wittmann. It was Father Wittmann who advised Caroline and the other young women to become teachers. Father Wittmann served as Caroline's spiritual mentor and shared the vision of a new religious order with Christian education, especially of poor girls, as its primary service. He offered support and encouragement to Caroline as they moved to the foundation of a new congregation (You Are Sent, pp. 122-123). However, Wittmann died suddenly in March of 1833 before the congregation was founded. Although Wittmann's death was sudden, he had already asked his good friend, Father Francis Sebastian Job, to offer support, guidance, and counseling to Caroline. He did this, as well as offered financial assistance, and wrote a rule for the congregation. This rule reflected his and Wittmann's insights for the young congregation. Within the year, in February of 1834, Father Job died. This left Caroline alone and on her own with her young congregation (Mary Theresa of Jesus Gerhardinger, pp. 16-17).
Caroline, now Mary Theresa of Jesus, continued with the formation and growth of this new congregation. She believed it was necessary to send sisters out in two’s and three’s in order to reach people in rural areas. She also insisted on a unifying central government to keep all the sisters connected to her and each other. She believed a woman should lead the congregation which was controversial at the time. However, she stayed focused on God and her beliefs, even amidst great struggle (You Are Sent, pp. 124-125).

As the congregation grew in Europe, it also spread to North America. In 1847, Mother Theresa, three sisters, and one novice, left Germany for the United States. They arrived in New York City on July 31, 1847. They made their way to Baltimore and slowly began the congregation of the School Sisters of Notre Dame on a new continent. Mother Theresa’s writings tell us she found that trip and her return to Germany by boat very difficult. She never returned to America but that did not stop her from establishing our congregation in this new land. She continued to oversee the sisters in North America but did always have one sister in charge for the local area. For many years this one sister was Mother Caroline Friess. Mother Caroline was one of the three sisters to travel with Mother Theresa to North America in 1847. She is often considered our American foundress and was instrumental in establishing our congregation in North America. Although Mother Caroline was “in charge” of the sisters and foundations in North
America, Mother Theresa was still the major superior and therefore Mother Caroline's superior. This again shows Mother Theresa's belief in central government and her desire for unity.

Mother Theresa's own spirituality influenced the spirituality of the congregation. "Her love for God, nourished and strengthened by her devotion to the Blessed Sacrament, enkindled the burning desire of her life: to know him and to do his will" (You Are Sent, p. 124). "She grounded her community in poverty in order to reach the poor and dedicated it to Mary, in whom she found a model for herself, her sisters, and the young girls she served" (You Are Sent, p. 124). As educators, she believed in the importance of the example of the instructor as well as the importance of integrating both instruction and character development.

Mother Mary Theresa of Jesus died on June 20, 1879. In his eulogy at Mother Theresa's funeral, Monsignor Adalbert Huhn described her attitude toward the growth of the congregation:

When she spoke of her order, she called it, with emphasis and reverence, the work of God...Her love for souls impelled her to go from one end of Europe to the other—from one continent to another; the salvation of souls was the inspiration of all her endeavors....It was not the greatness of the number of her sisters that delighted her, but their inward transformation to the image and likeness of the crucified Son of God (You Are Sent, p. 126).
Mother Theresa was beatified in 1985 and the School Sisters of Notre Dame wait with hope for the day of her canonization. For each of us knows our foundress, our mother, this woman of God is a saint.

Our charism, gift of the Spirit, was embodied in Blessed Mary Theresa of Jesus Gerhardinger, Who, longing for the oneness of all in God, Grounded the congregation in Eucharist, Anchored it in poverty, And dedicated it to Mary.

A woman of faith, Ever seeking God’s will, She struggled for unity in our international community, And responded to urgent needs, Preferring the poor and educating with a world vision.

In these gifts of the Spirit to our foundress, Mother Theresa, we recognize the evolving charism of our congregation. Our charism continues to develop in the living community, Which enriched by the past, Enables the congregation To unfold in the present and To be challenged by the future.

In a spirit of creative fidelity to Jesus Christ, the church, and our charism, we commit ourselves, as members of a religious institute of pontifical right dedicated to apostolic works, to continue the mission of Christ for which we have been consecrated. Through the power of the Spirit, we carry out this mission particularly through

Our efforts toward unity, Our community life, Our ministry directed toward education, Our common search for and doing of God’s will.

Mary, mother of the church and of our congregation, gently challenges us:
‘DO WHATEVER HE TELLS YOU.’ (You Are Sent, pp. 17-19)

As one can conclude from the information I have shared about the School Sisters of Notre Dame, each congregation’s heritage and charism is essential to its identity. Central to who we are as School Sisters of Notre Dame are three qualities and activities: striving toward unity, community life, and the education of the whole person, especially women, children, and those who are poor. To claim and act upon this threefold charism is consistent with a transformative model of Religious Life. A transformative model looks closely at why a congregation was established. It looks at why it came into being and what purpose it was established to serve. It looks at its history, its story of coming into being, who helped begin it, and how it has carried out the mission of Jesus Christ over the years. It is essential, in a transformative model, to know the purpose and reason for founding a congregation, and to reclaim it.

Although God can and does call religious to new ministries and experiences, it is important, in a transformative model, to always look to the foundation of the congregation. If a congregation was founded to educate children who are poor but all their sisters are ministering in affluent communities, it is necessary to discern this choice because our world is still filled with poor children in need of an education. If a congregation was founded to offer health care to those who cannot afford it and all the sisters are in parish
work, again I suggest that this needs to be discerned. Perhaps the congregation should be careful to stay faithful to its charism, and remember in diversity of gifts there are others who can respond. A transformative model calls the sisters, the congregation to look at why they were founded and to answer two questions. These questions are: Is the purpose for which we were founded still viable in these times? and In our present ministries and way of life, are we faithful to the original call of our congregation? Asking and answering these questions communally is what it means to discern.

From early in my experience of Religious Life I remember a communal discernment in my province. A few sisters had come together to talk about opening a center for women. Over a period of time, more sisters chose to be involved in the process and planned meetings to discern if a center would be a possibility. Eventually our Provincial Council and Provincial Assembly were involved. What I remember most vividly was the day when, after much planning and preparation, each delegate to the Provincial Assembly was asked to speak in support of, or opposition to, this new center for women. As each sister spoke, the energy grew in the room and consensus was reached in support of a center. Following that, two sisters began the center which continues to thrive today. More will be told about this center in the next chapter.
The transformative model I have been developing represents a call for creative balance. Congregations should not stay so locked into their original purpose that they cannot move with God’s Spirit, nor should they respond to every new movement such that they lose their center. So how should a congregation respond to the needs and spirit of the wider culture without losing its roots? Vatican II used the concept of responding to the signs of the times. This principle, then, is the focus of the next chapter.
CHAPTER FOUR

SIGNS OF THE TIMES

Institutes should see to it that their members have a proper understanding of people, of the contemporary situation and of the needs of the church, this to the end that, evaluating the contemporary world wisely in the light of faith, and fired with apostolic zeal, they may be more helpful to people – Perfectæ Caritatis.

This chapter will deal with signs of the times. The Second Vatican Council made responding to them a task of the Church and Perfectæ Caritatis made responding to them a task for Religious Life. It has been a rallying cry for social relevance (as for the cultural Religious), but Vatican II rooted it in tradition and in Christ. This chapter illustrates the kind of questions Religious should be asking in order to discern and respond to the signs of the times.

As I begin this chapter on the signs of the times, less than two years since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, I face a troubled and broken world. I am writing on a flight from Chicago, Illinois to Hartford, Connecticut. I just navigated the updated security procedures at Midway Airport. I watched as security personnel asked me to step away and sent my suitcase through a large screening machine. I went through the security checkpoint and was asked to remove my laptop, take off my shoes, and place all my belongings on a belt that would bring them through a machine for screening. I am grateful for the
security. I would rather take extra time and be safe. But I do believe it says something about me and about our world.

As I passed newspaper racks and heard about the news of the last few days, the main message is "alert!" We are under a heightened alert. We may not be safe. Is someone really out to get us? Many people are saying that New York and Washington, D.C. are targets. Many people are saying that we should prepare for an attack: get bottled water, duct tape, be ready to seal up our house in case of... something – we are not sure what. Many say we are at risk. Others say it is our own government trying to instill fear of our enemies so Americans will support an attack on them. What is the truth? Where do we turn? What do we do?

I stayed in an area of Chicago where some of the sisters in my congregation live. They told me taxis will not come into that area. The area is considered a dangerous neighborhood. What does that say about the people who live there? How are they stereotyped? What is life like for them? What conditions do they endure?

Anywhere we turn we can find poverty – economical, spiritual, educational, emotional, psychological – some kind of poverty. How do we deal with it? What do we do? How can those who are poor in some way(s) find a
way out of their poverty? How can those who are rich in some way(s) find a way to help reach out to others and try to help transform the situation?

Many men and women are executed each year. Millions of unborn children have been aborted over the years. The sick and elderly, and their loved ones, are faced with a decision about euthanasia or "mercy killing." When do we end the suffering of someone? Does the suffering person have a right to end his or her own life so as not to suffer anymore? The question that arises for me regarding all of these situations centers around the right to live versus the right to die. Who holds the right to choose whether a person lives or dies? Our society seems to believe that life is disposable. While not all of society seems to believe this, many do.

Men and women can be put to death for committing a crime. I am not saying crimes should go unpunished but I am saying our society says death is an acceptable punishment for criminal activity. Our Supreme Court legalized abortion in 1973; Roe vs. Wade said a woman has a right to choose whether the unborn baby growing in her womb can live or die. Doctors have started to look toward ending a patient's life because of extreme suffering and/or terminal illness. Who holds the right to decide whether a person can live or die?

Many say we live in a post-modern world, yet others are saying that it is no longer post-modern, but a post-September 11th world. When the World Trade
Center and the Pentagon were attacked and the plane crash in Pennsylvania occurred on September 11, 2001, everything changed for those who live in the United States. It is a different world. Our sense of security has been shaken. Our belief that we are safe has been distorted. Nothing is absolute in this world. There is so little we can count on.

Religious Life proclaims just the opposite. First of all, as has already been said, Religious Life is rooted in Jesus Christ. Its foundation and reason for existence come out of a belief in and relationship with our God in the person of Jesus Christ. Religious Life says that only God is absolute. Religious Life says that our only safety, our only security, is in God. If Religious Life does not come out of our rootedness or our attempts to be rooted in God, then it makes no sense. If Religious Life is not about the living, witnessing and proclaiming the Good News, the Gospel, of Jesus Christ, then it is not Religious Life. Therefore, the first thing Religious Life brings to our world is the conviction that Jesus Christ was sent to save us. Through his suffering, death, and resurrection from the dead, he has offered us eternal life with our God. Religious Life brings deep faith and hope to our world by witnessing to the reality that the world is redeemed. This is indeed GOOD NEWS! Of course, this is the call of all baptized Christians, but it is even more specific for those called by God to Religious Life.

From the moment of our baptism we are open in a new way to the initiative of God in our lives. We are incorporated into the life of Christ
and into the community of the church which is by its very nature missionary. Thus, with all who have been baptized, we share in Christ’s mission to proclaim the good news of God’s kingdom. *(You Are Sent, Constitution 2)*

In the power of Christ’s spirit, we respond anew to God’s continuing call, accepting his love as he consecrates us as apostolic women religious. We commit ourselves to live out the gift of baptism within our congregation, an ecclesial community graced with the charism of Mother Theresa. *(You Are Sent, Constitution 3)*

Religious Life looks to life-giving solutions in difficult situations. Religious Life does not promote or support violence. Religious Life does not believe in destruction. Rather, it believes in building up and promoting life. Religious Life believes in the truth. It is counter-cultural. It does not support governments instilling fear in their citizens. It does not support peoples fighting against each other. In fact, in so many congregations there are women from so many different countries. This is not to say all members of each congregation always get along. But it is to say that most women in the congregations try to get along and to understand both similarities and differences. Religious Life attests to the fact that women from many different countries and women of different races can and do live together peacefully. For me, this is a direct witness of women Religious to the signs of the times.

*The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, known by its Latin title, *Gaudium et Spes*, was promulgated by the Second Vatican Council on December 7, 1965, and speaks about the signs of the times.
In every age the church carries the responsibility of reading the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel, if it is to carry out its task. In language intelligible to every generation, it should be able to answer the ever recurring questions which people ask about the meaning of this present life and of the life to come, and how one is related to the other. We must be aware of and understand the aspirations, the yearnings, and the often dramatic features of the world in which we live (*Gadium et Spes*, no. 4).

*Gadium et Spes* goes on to highlight some of the more important features of the modern world. It addresses the rapid growth in society based on the intellect and creativity of people. It also speaks of the increase of power this rapid growth can bring and the risk that this power might lack control. Another area addressed is the “abundance of wealth, resources and economic well-being” enjoyed by much of humanity. But while so many people enjoy wealth, “a huge proportion of the people of the world is plagued by hunger and extreme need while countless numbers are totally illiterate.” People enjoy more freedom than in the past. While the world is aware of its unity and interdependence, there is always the threat of division and a war with the potential for total destruction. There are many ideas but different ideologies to support them. *The Pastoral Constitution* addresses humanity’s search for a better material world but not so much of a search for a better spiritual world. (no. 4) This document was written almost forty years ago yet it could have been written yesterday about our present times. The “issues” might have a different look than they did in 1965, but these key features, these concerns of the modern world are still present.
Again I return to some examples from my own congregation, the School Sisters of Notre Dame, and our attempts to recognize, discern, and respond to the signs of the times. As already stated, my congregation is international. During World War II, our General Superior, Mother Almeda, who lived and worked in Germany, wrote to Mother Fidelis, the sister in charge of all the North American sisters. Mother Almeda said they (particularly the German sisters) would understand if we (Americans and Canadians) needed to separate from them and form a separate congregation as a result of the war. Mother Fidelis, from North America, wrote back and said that we are their sisters, that we would remain faithful and stay united, even though our world was at war. This was a witness of our charism of unity to a broken, divided world. “Unity” was highlighted in a previous chapter as part of our charism. It is centered on our call to make one, to bring all to oneness in Jesus Christ. After World War II, many of our European provinces became part of the Soviet Union and were forced to live under repressive communist regimes. Many of those sisters were forced to live Religious Life in hiding, and some became part of the underground Church in many countries. Others had to return to family to live. Many sisters were no longer allowed to wear the religious habit. Overnight with the building of the Berlin Wall one province in Germany was split – East Germany and West Germany. With the end of Communism, the sisters were reunited and came
together to rebuild relationships and the community that had been separated so many years before. Again, this is a witness of the call to unity so central to our charism.

When I think about the area where I stayed with some of our sisters in Chicago, I wonder what our order is called to do there. Just the fact that the sisters have remained there, in this neighborhood, is a witness. A few years ago the sisters decided to sell the all-girls’ academy on that property which we had sponsored and staffed for years. They took pains to make sure the new school would support and uphold the same values they had promoted there for so long. The sisters also made a choice to keep the convent and continue to live there. Taxis will not drive there but the sisters have lived there for years and years. They witness to faithfulness. They witness to the value of the people in the neighborhood and to a commitment to continue the tradition of the School Sisters of Notre Dame in this area.

It has been two months now since I was on that flight from Chicago. The nation is at war. Operation Iraqi Freedom, as some call it. Iraq needs to be freed and the United States must be the country to free them, we are told. The media broadcast blow-by-blow attacks shown on the television. We have been updated about every occurrence. I have even heard that there are new computer games for children that simulate a war experience. I maintain that our call as Religious
is to promote peace and justice for all. We are never called to promote violence as a solution for anything.

I have heard sisters say they do not support abortion but no one has the right to tell a mother what to do with her body. What about the baby? Does anyone have a responsibility to speak on behalf of the baby? Isn’t the baby the one who is voiceless? I have heard sisters wonder whether or not the death penalty is a just punishment. Shouldn’t we be the ones to stand up for life? Shouldn’t we look at a situation and ask how we can uphold and respect the life God has given here? Religious Life is called to witness to life and to witness life. This means that Religious Life must promote life and uphold life, all of life. Religious Life says that all life is sacred and valuable.

Pope John Paul II has said all Christians are called to promote a Culture of Life. Catholic faith and teachings say that all life is sacred and valuable and thus Catholic Religious Life is guided. Religious need a notion of the signs of the times that shows our reading, interpreting, and applying is guided by our faith.

I realize that I have focused on so many questions and challenges. So I ask myself, “In what positive and life-giving ways do women Religious respond to the signs of the times?” There are many. In these years since I entered my congregation, I have come to realize more and more what a gift it is to be part of something bigger than myself. I realize that I am Maria Ianuccillo and I am a
School Sister of Notre Dame. The latter makes me a part of an international congregation of women, more than 4,500 women, serving in over thirty countries. I am part of a rich history of a group of women who have contributed significantly to our Church and our world. While I am in the Northeast promoting Religious Life to young women as an option for their life, my sisters are meeting needs all over the world. My sisters are teaching English to immigrant women in the United States. They are working with economically poor women and children in North America, South America, Africa, Asia, and Europe. We are standing up for peace and justice in our world. We are marching for life and sending letters to politicians asking for an end to the death penalty. We are educating the whole person everywhere we go in any setting with a vision that education can and will transform the world. We are trying, everyday, to respond to the needs of our world and God’s people.

My province has just over 300 members and covers the geographical area of New England, New York, and part of New Jersey. We serve in these areas as well as in other areas around the world. One way my province has made an effort to respond to the signs of the times is by educating economically poor, immigrant women. In 1994, we opened Caroline House, an educational center for women with a childcare facility for their children who are not school age, in Bridgeport, Connecticut. At Caroline House the sisters and staff teach the women
English as well as life skills (banking, meeting with your child's teacher, etc.)
The staff also offers spiritual guidance and support programs. Just this year we
are opening another educational center for women in Jamaica, New York. There
are also plans to open an educational center for women in Rochester, New York.
These centers are true to our charisms as School Sisters of Notre Dame, especially
our charism of educating women. These centers are also an attempt to meet the
needs of our times.

I believe all Religious continue to try to respond to God’s call and to the
needs of God’s people. Our choices and how we interact with the world and
culture can distinguish us as Religious. Radical Religious Life, according to
Philibert, separates itself from the culture. It lives in its own world. Some
congregations who would fit this type of Religious Life don’t watch television or
read a newspaper or drive a car. How do they identify the signs of the times?
How do they know where the needs are and find ways to address them?
Cultural Religious Life immerses itself in the culture. I wonder if some
congregations or individual members of congregations have become so
immersed in the culture that their perspective on the signs of the times has
become skewed. If one becomes totally immersed in the culture, how can one see
the culture, with its gifts and challenges clearly? So many apostolic
congregations of women have become immersed in the culture. Of course,
whatever is in the world is in Religious Life and whatever is part of the culture is part of Religious Life. For years now, sisters have moved to a very flexible and comfortable lifestyle. We need to be comfortable in order to be about our ministry. I do not deny that need. But how immersed in the culture do we need to be?

Transformative Religious Life is not separate from nor totally immersed in the culture. Rather, transformative Religious Life sees the present culture clearly and is part of it, but it does not allow itself to be immersed in it. Transformative Religious Life tries to identify the present culture and apply the Gospel of Jesus Christ to it. Transformative Religious Life lives within the world and the culture, yet apart from it. This type of Religious Life calls its members to live in the real world, take part in the world, but to be able to step apart from the world’s distraction. We are so skilled and so dedicated to service that we could get caught up in our good works and lose sight of our focus.

Transformative Religious Life calls its members to live in community, to choose to not live alone but to live with a group of its members. It calls them to share all in common. This call means responsibility for the building they live in as well as for the life of the community. It means that there is sharing of responsibility and of faith. It also calls its members to be part of the larger community, for example, a province or district, and to participate in that large
community. It doesn't mean that everything has to be done or said by everyone.

It doesn’t mean that it is a life without boundaries. It does mean that part of the
witness of Religious is a life of faith and a life lived in community. Doesn’t our
world need the witness of faith in God and the witness of community, of a group
of people living together because of their deep belief in Jesus Christ as Savior and
Redeemer and living together peacefully?

We all know that there are exceptions to every rule. Sometimes someone
does need to live alone. Sometimes we need to make decisions when we are not
sure what to do or how to respond but try to trust that God will lead us.
Sometimes other needs call to us and God invites us to respond. Only God is
absolute. We do not have all the answers.

A transformative model of Religious Life does invite its members to be in
the world but able to step back from it. This model does call its members to try to
look at the world and the present culture; to identify the needs; to respond out of
their center, Jesus Christ, and then to respond with faithfulness to their charism.

The joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the people of our time,
especially of those who are poor or afflicted, are the joys and hopes, the
grief and anguish of the followers of Christ as well (Gadium et Spes, no. 1).
CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

A TRANSFORMATIVE MODEL

This chapter will bring the thesis to conclusion by identifying a transformative model of Religious Life for apostolic congregations of women in the United States. What is the story of Religious? It is that encounter with Jesus Christ – at some moment, over many moments, which has moved us, called us, changed us. An encounter with Jesus called us to live out our Baptism as consecrated Religious. Encounters over the years have continued to call us to go to new places, meet new people, do things we didn’t think we could do, accept change and sufferings, sacrifice, realize God’s many gifts to us. Encounters over the years have deepened our spirituality, our love for Jesus and for Jesus’ people.

Transformative Religious Life, at this critical time in the history of Religious Life, invites us to contemplate Jesus Christ. Prayer in the transformative model allows for flexibility but also chooses some uniformity. It is neither institutional nor cultural. A congregation may choose a prayer that is appropriate for them and ask all members to pray that prayer daily. Prayer also might include special themes, such as a prayer service for peace. What is more important in this model is that prayer is central and that it is contemplative. This call to contemplation is for the individual as well as for the community. So
prayer for a local community might include some traditional prayers of the Church, some prayers connected with a theme for the particular day, but would definitely include a common prayer for the congregation and time for contemplation of Jesus Christ.

The transformative model of Religious Life sees Religious having an evangelical approach to the world. They try to engage the world and transform it through Gospel values. Personal conversion and public witness are characteristic of this evangelical approach. Transformative Religious want to share their story of their own conversion as well as witness publicly to their faith in Jesus Christ (DiLanni).

Transformative Religious are called to search for the areas of unmet needs while being faithful to their founding charism. Many congregations, while still keeping their initial focus like education or hospital ministry, have moved into a wide variety of ministries. This can bring its own richness but it can also move a congregation away from its original founding.

I do propose that congregations seriously look at the present needs like our founders/foundresses did years ago. Where are the unmet needs? Who are the outcasts? Who has been cast aside? Who are the poorest of the poor? Who are the hungry for food and spiritual nourishment? Who is without opportunities for betterment of self and family? Who has been put down by
society? Who is oppressed in the United States and our world? It is essential that the original founding charism is used as a lens when deciding on ministry.

Recently, at our Provincial Assembly, one sister shared work on a proposal for a new ministry venture. This new ministry would be in Rochester, New York, where our congregation has had a long history. Originally at the invitation of the Provincial Council, the sisters in the Rochester area looked at ways to continue our SSND charism there. They assessed our own SSND population in the area, e.g. age, physical stamina, etc. Then they assessed the needs. What they found was a need to reach out to women and children. They are now in the process of planning for a center for women and children, trying to meet the present day needs. As I listened to the presentation I was aware that energy and excitement and hope were growing in the room. I felt that our foundress, Blessed Theresa, could have made that presentation because the project is truly in keeping with our charism.

For transformative Religious, ministry is very important. Religious Life calls the sister to be engaged in ministry, to strive to meet the needs, but also to do so in a way that always includes sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ. For transformative Religious, Religious Life always includes the witness of their own personal conversion and the public witness of their faith in Jesus Christ. Transformative Religious are not removed from the world and the present
culture as are radical Religious. Neither are they totally immersed in the world and its present culture as are cultural Religious. Rather, transformative Religious are part of the world and its present culture, but try to transform it through Gospel values. Transformative Religious Life is a middle-ground. It does not live in extremes. It cannot totally stand out from nor be so immersed in the world that it is unrecognizable.

Transformative Religious Life is not separate from nor totally immersed in the culture. Rather, transformative Religious Life sees the present culture clearly and is part of it, but it does not allow itself to be immersed in it. Transformative Religious Life tries to identify the present culture and apply the Gospel of Jesus Christ to it. Transformative Religious Life lives within the world and the culture, yet apart from it. This type of Religious Life calls its members to live in the real world, take part in the world, but to be able to step apart from the world’s distraction.

All Christians are called to live the Gospel messages of Jesus Christ, but Religious are called in a particular way to radically live His Gospel. And so, as we are centered in Jesus Christ and continue to grow in and into that relationship, we are called in new and radical ways to live His Gospel. I believe a transformative model of Religious Life does just that. It looks at the history of the congregation, its traditions, its deep beliefs, and tries to discern what holds deep
meaning for the sister and the congregation. It does not say: do this because I said so. It does say: this is significant for us, this holds great meaning, let me share this with you and pass it on to the next generation. Transformative Religious Life tries to identify and reclaim that which holds meaning and significance for the group.

As you can conclude from the information I have shared about the Schol Sisters of Notre Dame, each congregation's heritage and charism is essential to its identity. A transformative model of Religious Life looks closely at why a congregation was established. It looks at why it came into being and what purpose it was established to serve. It looks at its history, its story of coming into being, who helped begin it, and how it has carried out the mission of Jesus Christ over the years. It is essential, in a transformative model, to know the purpose and reason for founding a congregation, and to reclaim it. Although God can and does call religious to new ministries and experiences, it is important to always look to the foundation of the congregation.

Transformative Religious Life calls its members to live in community, to live with a group of its members. It calls them to share all in common. This call means responsibility for the building they live in as well as the life of the community. It means that there is sharing of responsibility and of faith. It also calls its members to be part of the larger community, for example, a province or
district, and to participate in that large community. It doesn't mean that everything has to be done or said by everyone. It doesn't mean that it is a life without boundaries. It does mean that part of the witness of Religious is a life of faith and a life lived in community.

We all know that there are exceptions to every rule. Sometimes someone does need to live alone. Sometimes we need to make decisions out of an area that is not clear, when we are not sure what to do or how to respond but try to trust that God will lead us. Sometimes other needs call to us and God invites us to respond. Only God is absolute. We do not have all the answers. A transformative model of Religious Life does invite its members to be in the world but able to step back from it. This model does call its members to try to look at the world and the present culture; to identify the needs; to respond out of their center, Jesus Christ, and then to respond with faithfulness to their charism.

One area which seems to be quite controversial among Religious is the wearing of a habit. A transformative model does not suggest returning to a pre-Vatican II religious habit. In those times, Religious were required to always wear their habit. However, a transformative model also does not say just wear a cross or pin or nothing that would identify the Religious as just that. A transformative model does include wearing some outward sign of the inward reality. It would be more than a cross or pin and less than a traditional habit.
Permit me to explain this further. Several weeks after September 11, 2001, I visited Ground Zero with one of my good friends. We had planned to attend Saturday evening Mass at St. Patrick’s Cathedral but became so caught up in all we were experiencing at Ground Zero, we lost track of time. As we made our way from the area of the Twin Towers, we began to look for a church. At one corner we saw several New York City policemen. We asked for their help and they directed us to a church. It was their outward appearance that told us something of what they represent. We knew we could approach them and that most likely they could help us. I’m sure they do not wear their uniforms from morning until night unless they are on duty. They wear the uniform that identifies them when it is appropriate for their work.

Similar to these officers and the uniform they wear, a transformative model calls Religious to appropriate dress at appropriate times. A transformative model suggests that Religious should be identified by some particular attire. Congregations would need to discern what this attire would be but they must look back to their foundation as a congregation for guidance. In the past (and in the present for some communities), sisters put on the habit early in the morning and removed it before bed, every day. There was no other option. This can be considered extreme. A transformative model calls the Religious to wear the
chosen dress of the congregation when appropriate, for example during liturgical celebrations, ministry, and community gatherings.

Simply put, a transformative model reclaims what is constant in Religious Life. It calls its members to live in community, to pray individually and together, to contemplate Jesus Christ, to share meals, to hold all in common. It asks its members to evaluate and respond to the signs of the times through the lens of their charism. It asks its members to use the Gospel to transform the world. It asks its members to be identified in the world – to choose some outward sign by which others will know who they are and what they represent. It is really not a new story – maybe just a reclaiming of who we are, of who we are called to be – Apostolic Women Religious – with a rich history and significant contribution to our Church and to our world.

I do believe if apostolic congregations move more and more into a transformative model, we will not only continue to exist in the United States, but others will come and join us, and we will continue to live our distinct call among the People of God for years to come.
References


