

## **Vatican II Religious: Who have we become?**

### **Panel presentation by Loraine d'Entremont, sc**

As I reflected on how to approach this topic, it occurred to me that one's situation relative to an event will have bearing on the perception of where one is relative to that same event some fifty years later. I know that some of my experiences during the years of Vatican II have had significant influence on how I have viewed and experienced religious life and the Church in subsequent years.

#### **Where I Was Then**

Vatican II began on October 11, 1962 and ended on December 8, 1965. I graduated from Mount Saint Vincent University, then College under Sisters of Charity ownership, in 1964 and entered the Sisters of Charity in September of that year. You will realize that 2014 is the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of my graduation and of my entry into religious life, as well as a 50<sup>th</sup> of the Vatican II event. This is indeed an auspicious year for me!

Two experiences of my university years were foundational in shaping my vision of religious life and the Church. One was a religious studies course on the Church, in which we were made aware of the momentousness of Vatican II, and kept as current of its progress as was possible then.

The other was reading the Leon Joseph Cardinal Suenens' book, *The Nun in the World*, supplied by the college chaplain, to me and several others discerning a vocation to religious life. It broadened my view of religious life, and addressed some of the stumbling blocks in my discernment. One of the reviewers described the book as "an inspiring book, which sets out the religious ideal beautifully, but is critical of its actual embodiment." <sup>1</sup> I did not know this then, but now know that the first edition of this book, published in French before the Council, was very influential in shaping the Council documents on religious life.

So, fifty years ago, I came to religious life anticipating and welcoming the changes Vatican II would bring for religious life and the Church. In my congregation, some of these changes came quickly, particularly in the area of formation, and this, along with our first Chapter of Renewal in 1968, gave me a sense of things unfolding as they should relative to my hopes and expectations at the time. My greatest challenge around the implementation of Vatican II was to live in some of the unrest it generated in those to whom it came as a shock, so I have always considered it a special grace in my life that I was providentially prepared for it. Regardless of our point of entry into Vatican II, we have lived its evolution, with its blessings and challenges over the past fifty years and bring this to today's reflection on where we are now.

#### **Where I See Us Now**

The statement of Suenens' book reviewer about 'setting out the religious ideal beautifully' while being 'critical of its actual embodiment' strikes me as a good stance for presenting and viewing ourselves as apostolic religious. The 'religious ideal', i.e., the essential components and motivations of the religious life, are raised up for us in Conciliar and other Church documents and in some writings of contemporary theologians on religious life. We hold up the ideal for one another in Constitutions, in

studies and conversations around our particular charisms, and the ongoing prayer and reflection of our lives as religious. It seems to me we have held on to the 'religious ideal' of our vocation, so I will not devote more time or words to that in this presentation. What I offer are some reflections on the 'actual embodiment' as I see it today.

When I look at what we have become, or "The Position Today", as Cardinal Suenens titled the first part of his book, what strikes me immediately as different today from fifty years ago is our emerging world view, termed by some the new cosmology. It arises from new scientific knowledge, which shows the entire universe, including human beings, to be evolving, and interrelated in ways previously unknown. This expands the context in which we have seen ourselves as religious, and gives rise to new questions about our place in this context, as we explore its implications for spirituality, theology, community and ministry.

The New Cosmology and Christian Faith workshops offered by CRC in 2013 are attempts to address some of these questions, whose answers have the potential to alter some of our structures, and ways of being present in the world. While some among us are passionate about engaging the new world view, others do not share the same enthusiasm, so some wait in less than joyful hope for this new view to be grasped. So in our congregations, we seem to be in a position of straddling world views.

Meanwhile, we are living in the place to which we have moved in the renewal and adaptation we embraced as Vatican II mandate, and in the particular situation of our congregations. I present a snapshot view of where I see us, using the traditional tripod of the religious life, i.e. prayer, ministry and community as my focal points. Though I separate them for the sake of discussion, I recognize that life and the Holy Spirit move fluidly among the three.

### **Prayer**

By prayer, I refer not only to personal prayer, but to all the components that nourish our lives spiritually, including liturgy and the spiritual resources of our charisms. We are probably more authentic in our personal prayer than we once were, and more diverse in our spirituality, both within congregations and between congregations. This diversity creates challenges and tensions for communal prayer, which ideally would be a source of unity.

We struggle with a variety of issues around Eucharist, which can become more divisive than unifying in some circumstances. Charism seems to be the common spiritual resource to which most of us can adhere and refer to in discernment. All this being said, we do find ways to pray, work and live with one another in our differences.

### **Ministry**

Ministry is the area that is most easily observable to those outside our congregations who have noticed our changes since Vatican II. The shift from institutional ministries to a variety of individual or smaller scale ministries is obvious. We are aware of our diminished visibility as a result of this shift, as well as its implications for local community life, congregational identity and financial stability in some cases. We are also aware that some of these newer ministries have brought the light of the Gospel to places where it would not otherwise shine, and may point to future directions. Added to the mix currently

is the decreasing number of members who can engage in full time ministry in many apostolic religious congregations.

An emerging trend in ministry is collaboration among congregations of similar charism, or international collaboration, around particular issues such as trafficking. Here in the Atlantic region, we have the Maritime Project, a collaboration of Sisters of Charity Federation congregations working to address homelessness and housing issues. Such collaborations are entered into with a clear sense of wanting to strengthen the impact of the Gospel and our charisms in the world by addressing pressing human needs.

We are not as clear, however, about our ministry in the Church. Sandra Schneiders, theologian and writer on religious life, has studied the patterns of sisters' ministries in the US post-Vatican II to the present.<sup>ii</sup> She states that the theology of ministry articulated by Vatican II gave no place to religious in the ecclesial ministerial structure of the Church. This, coupled with the disappearance of institutions such as schools, led to an experience of 'placelessness' in ministry for religious. However, she sees a pattern and progression in the post-Vatican experience, and asserts that "...if we can reclaim and rearticulate our ministerial identity in contemporary terms, which I believe we are in the process of doing, we will become newly visible in the Church."<sup>iii</sup>

### **Community**

I turn now to the third leg of the tripod, community. In 'community', I include not only the life of local religious community groups, but also the process of how we live our congregational life, and how we witness as a corporate body. Beginning with the local level, we know that more of us are living singly or in two's, and fewer of us are living in community groups of three or more. While it is not the canonical norm, this reality does sometimes result in creative incarnations of community that may be indicators of future community patterns. An example of this is self-mandated regular gatherings of sisters who live singly in the same general area.

Some questions raised by this living situation are: Do community configurations in this age of instant communication have to be the same as they were fifty or a hundred years ago? What is the witness of this living arrangement? Do we need to reframe our vision and embodiment of community in keeping with new contexts? Over all, what is this experience telling us?

Diversity in ministry and greater individual freedom have resulted in a weakened sense of congregational identity, or sense of the whole. A small but telling experience of mine in the early '90's speaks to this trend. Three of us who lived in the same house and were among the younger members of the province attended a province meeting, where we participated in different discussion groups. I don't recall the exact focus of the groups, but I know it related to our experience of the congregation at that time. After the meeting, we shared our group discussion experiences and saw they were similar.

The majority, or all, the sisters in our groups talked about how wonderful it was to have the freedom to choose one's ministry, community and so forth, while our preoccupying experience in the congregation was what we felt as loss of sense of the whole, or seeming corporate drift. We had voiced this in our groups, and were surprised to hear that the majority did not resonate with this concern, so we questioned the accuracy of our perception. Subsequently, a sociological study of religious orders in the US published in 1994 by Patricia Wittberg, religious and sociologist, showed our perception

to be alarmingly true.<sup>iv</sup> However, some sense of corporate identity does prevail in our congregations, demonstrated by the fact that we have been able to affirm corporate voice statements on matters of justice and human rights that we know have been effective where they were directed. Thus our voice and witness in the world have not been totally muted by uncertainty about corporate identity and mission.

What I have presented in this short sketch are broad and general observations that will not apply equally to all, and may not apply at all to some. I have aimed to present the challenges and growing edges. The gospel story of the weeds and wheat that must grow together until harvest time (Matt.13:24-30) comes to mind here.

### **What Next?**

While we straddle different world views, and continue to give great energy in conversation or otherwise to any of the issues presented so far, we face a reality that neither Vatican II nor ourselves would have predicted fifty years ago: the current average ages of many of our congregations. I'm glad we still engage the issues with energy. They are our life, and we want vitality for as long as we can muster it for our own sakes and for the mission.

However, it feels a bit schizoid to me at times when all, or most of the conversation among members is about the present concerns of our lives, and very little of it relates to what will be significant demographic changes, with their implications, for some of our congregations in the next ten to fifteen years and beyond. The viability of some religious institutes in Canada and elsewhere is a pressing question at this time, and I feel it is urgent to ask the critical questions and have the pertinent conversations about it in our particular settings. This is not only to have security about the future, but primarily to discern how we may witness in diminishment and leave the best possible legacy.

There could be rebirths of some congregations, but even if a congregation does eventually revive, it will have issues around diminishment to address prior to any revival. At a conference of a group of vocation directors in this region some thirty years ago, the speaker, who was encouraging us to develop a plan for this somewhat nebulous ministry, so that we could exercise it healthily and effectively, said the words: "Planning is an act of hope." I think these words are particularly applicable in the face of diminishment.

A particular question that arises in times of diminishment, and that is of interest and concern to me, is whether or not to accept new members, let alone be proactive about attracting them. Responses to this question vary. Some would say absolutely not. Others are open, but have concerns about their ability to nourish the vocation of a younger person, given the congregation's average age, or about what future they can offer them. The moral imperative to encourage a vocation, should a candidate appear, is also expressed, along with hesitations about capability as a congregation for engaging in formation programs at this time.

My thinking about new members for this time takes another tack, and turns to the type of candidate who would be desirable. Here is a short profile of my sample future candidate. In addition to being drawn to the charism and the vocation of religious life, they would need the personal and professional skills to negotiate the shifts that are ahead of us. They would likely be in their 30's or 40's. They will need to be 'refounders', who, inspired by the charism, can envision new directions, and move others with them. They would

want an honest portrayal of where we are now, but vocation promotion materials or approaches that highlight ministries we have been or are currently engaged in would not have much appeal for them. They would prefer knowing where we want to be in five, ten or twenty years, and would be able to generate strategies to bring us there. In short, they would have an authentic vocation, and specific gifts for these times. How to attract these candidates, and what formation would be suitable for them could be the topic of another panel.

In concluding, I want to highlight what I see as hopeful signs that could possibly lead to a rise in the number of persons considering religious vocation. In Canada, there are well-publicized initiatives that foster community-mindedness and generosity, such as the “Me to We” movement, and the Governor General’s ‘giving moment’ initiative.

Governments in this country have publicly recognized the contributions of sisters to the development of the country, thus bringing public attention to religious life. Examples of this are the Alberta government’s recognition of sisters’ contributions to that province, and the Government of Canada’s recognition in May 2010 of the foundation of the Sisters of Charity in Halifax as an event of ‘national historic significance.’

Our Church is moving in a “New Evangelization” process, and my hope is that these ongoing efforts will engage people more deeply in their Christian vocation and perhaps open some to embrace a religious vocation. We also have the interest of academic groups. A research group funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada is studying *The State of Consecrated Life in Contemporary Canada*. Jason Zuidema, lead researcher for the group, says in a 2012 article: “....in my many conversations and visits to religious houses across Canada, I see no significant reason why some significant revival could not happen... A recurring theme I hear from religious – the ‘sign’ of the consecrated life in society is found much more in quality than quantity. Maybe in its death it will find new life.”<sup>v</sup>

As new life came from naming realities by Cardinal Suenens and others at Vatican II, may we courageously do the same now, in the hope that new life is possible for us, whatever shape it may take.

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<sup>i</sup> Vincent Rochford in the Catholic Herald

<sup>ii</sup> Sandra Schneiders, *That Was Then...This Is Now: The Past, Present and Future of Women Religious in the United States* (South Bend: Center for Spirituality, Saint Mary’s College, 2011). Lecture given in conjunction with the exhibit *Women and Spirit, Catholic Sisters in America*.

<sup>iii</sup> *That Was Then.....*20.

<sup>iv</sup> Patrica Wittberg, *The Rise and Fall of Catholic Religious Orders: A Social Movement Perspective*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994; p.256.

<sup>v</sup> Jason Zudeima, “The Death of Religious Life in Canada”, *Convivium* (September-October 2012) 18.

See [www.consecratedlife.ca](http://www.consecratedlife.ca) for more information on the research group.