

Who Have We Become? Structural Changes, a Time of Transformation

Panel Presentation by Margaret Patricia Brady, OSB

We begin this session with the question pertaining to *Religious Life 50 Years after Vatican II: Who have we become?* Before attempting to answer this question, it is necessary to look at the Vatican Council and the directions which it evoked.

Lumen Gentium

Lumen Gentium, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, addressed the Church first as Mystery then as the People of God. Using biblical imagery rather than juridical or canonically descriptive ones, a new and exciting path was set. Only in Chapter III was the hierarchical structure of the Church with special reference to the episcopate made. Even here bishops as pastors who shepherd the Lord's flock are seen as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. They teach and govern as members of the college of bishops in hierarchical communion with the Pope. From bishops, the priests are seen as cooperators with the episcopal order called to serve the People of God.

Next deacons, although not priests, are called to a ministry of service. In Chapter IV, the Laity is dealt with. While participating in the priestly, prophetic and kingly functions of Christ through their baptism, they seek the kingdom of God. Being led by the Spirit, they work for the sanctification of the world. Briefly mentioned here, Religious are dealt with more in-depth in Chapter VI. On the other hand, the whole Church is called to holiness in Chapter V. In Chapter VII the document sets forth the eschatological nature of the pilgrim church and her union with the heavenly Church. Finally, Chapter VIII looks at the role of Mary, Mother of God, within the mystery of Christ and the Church.

Renewal of Religious Life

Pope John XXIII spoke about bringing the Church into the modern world, opening the doors and the windows to let in fresh air. If we look at the agenda he set forth, we also see the renewal of religious life. Religious communities were told to see the Gospels as the highest rule of their institutes. Then they were asked to look at the spirit and aims of the Founders of their institutes. The Church's focus on biblical, liturgical, dogmatic, pastoral, ecumenical, missionary and social aims were to be adopted. Members of the various communities were to be given sufficient knowledge of the times and conditions they live in and of the needs of the Church. All changes or adaptations were to be animated by a renewal of Spirit.

Renewal took four stages namely:

- 1) Structural changes or reforms which set up collegial-type structures.
- 2) Rise of ministries and small communities.
- 3) Return to ecclesial mysticism obtained through communal prayer, meditation on the Scriptures and celebration of the liturgy wherein the Risen Christ is experienced in the community's midst.
- 4) The emergence of the Prophetic Dimension of ecclesial mysticism resulting in the community's willingness to challenge oppressive societal structures in a selfless love of the poor.

Ongoing Changes

It appears to me that we have gone through the four initial stages of the implementation and are now looking again at a return to stage one, structural changes. During the 1950s religious life flourished on the North American continent. Large buildings were erected to house novices. Over time vocations diminished and these structures were converted to college dorms, infirmaries or sold off.

Occupations also changed from teachers and nurses to social workers, licensed pharmacists, doctors, pediatricians, gerontologists, nurse-practitioners and a host of other professions. Communities also answered the call of poorer countries and became missionaries in South and Latin America as well as in Africa and Asia. Through the work of Thomas Berry, SJ, Brian Swimme and many others ecology and concern for the Earth and its greening engaged many religious as did the threat of global warming and the consequent changes in communal life that it called for.

How are we responding to all of this? Besides down-sizing, some are sharing their facilities with other religious communities, for example, Providence International Center in Montreal is now the home of four small communities who live out their own life styles and charisms in this centre. Some have amalgamated with others of their own community. Still others have disbanded with their members seeking to transfer to larger communities of their own who will accept them.

A time of Transformation

In the meantime, it is urgent for us to look at what is happening in the larger Church. There appears to be a new spring in the spiritual life of the laity. Religious communities who have oblates and associates see that these are definitely on the increase. These groups are flourishing and anxious to grow in the life of the Spirit. This is exciting even for communities in the throes of diminishment. It is a time of transformation, as Teilhard de Chardin would have said:

“The great victory of the Creator and Redeemer, in the Christian vision, is to have transformed what is itself a universal power of diminishment and extinction into an essentially life-giving factor. God must in some way or other make room for himself, hollowing us out and emptying us, if he is finally to penetrate into us. And in order to assimilate us into him, he must break the molecules of our being so as to recast and remodel us. The function of death is to bring about this opening up of our inmost selves which God desires. It will force us to undergo the disunion he is waiting for. It will put us into the state organically needed if the divine fire is to descend upon us. And in that way its fatal power to decompose and dissolve will be harnessed to the most sublime operations of life. What was by nature empty and void, a return to bits and pieces, can, in every human existence, become fullness and unity in God.” [Teilhard de Chardin, *The Divine Milieu*, trans., New York: Harper, 1960, pp. 68 – 69]

Facing the Hard Questions

My own community, the Benedictines of Nanaimo, B.C. faced the hard questions of diminishment and death. Through prayer and discernment, the seven finally professed members chose to stay together but the question was how. Although no new members

have joined us, our oblates and associates are definitely on the increase. In fact they are flourishing – we have twenty oblates, seven candidates and eleven associates. All of these are anxious to grow in the life of the Spirit and committed to the Benedictine way of life and spirituality.

After deep prayer and discernment, taking into consideration the enthusiasm of our oblates and especially our associates, we decided to adopt the model of the Abbeyfield Houses. This was begun in London, England in 1956 by Major Carr-Gomm who resigned his commission in the Coldstream Guards to care for the lonely people in the East End of London. To date there are over 1,100 homes worldwide providing a dwelling for independent seniors who do not wish to live alone but to live in a family style home.

With the Abbeyfield model in mind, we approached Jack Anderson, a local designer-architect who specializes in designing green facilities. Our monastery consists of two houses on Westwood Lake. Nanaimo City statutes limit the number of residents, not related, to five in each house. By joining the two buildings, and adding three or four suites, we would then fit under the category of rooming house which allows as many as twelve nonrelated residents.

Mr. Anderson has met with the community to take in their concerns and future requirements. Next he wishes to meet with interested oblates and associates to glean input and fresh ideas from them. After this he will draw up a plan and consult with a contractor to determine costs of remodeling. His contractor will also advise if starting from scratch might be more economically feasible. This is where we are at present. It is a large vision but it is exciting, life-giving and transformative.

Together we faced not only our own individual diminishment and death but also our communal or corporate death. Now we live thanking God for making us one with himself and with each other, one with those who we will share life with us as we draw closer to eternal life.