

The State of the Religious Life

in the Episcopal Church and elsewhere

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20th Anniversary Edition, Revised 2011

O Lord Jesus Christ, you became poor for our sake, that we might be made rich through your poverty: Guide and sanctify, we pray, those whom you call to follow you under the vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, that by their prayer and service they may enrich your Church, and by their life and worship may glorify your Name; for you reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*

— The Book of Common Prayer, Prayer 16, page 819

Portions of this monograph appeared in *The Servant* August 1985. Other material stems from presentations to gatherings of religious communities, and to the Catholic Fellowship of the Episcopal Church, from 1988 through 1989. The monograph was originally published by The Brotherhood of Saint Gregory in 1991, and is issued here in an updated and revised format.

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What religious life?

The reader is no doubt aware of the existence of religious orders and communities in the Episcopal Church, but it should come as no surprise that there are many who are unaware that such an expression of committed Christian life exists in their “protestant” church. There are others who know that the religious life exists, but are poorly informed about its nature and variety. Little is done to encourage vocations to the religious life — by clergy, by bishops, or by religious communities themselves. A vicious circle develops: lack of information and direction produces few applicants; lack of applicants leads to dwindling communities; and dwindling communities do not recommend themselves as viable options even to the well-informed.

In the Episcopal Church today there are about thirty organizations of religious, most of them monastic in character, many of them with fewer than a score of members, and some with fewer than six. Note that numerical strength is not a foolproof indication of the health of a community. A monastic community can survive quite well with fewer than a dozen members. Benedict of Nursia would not have approved of monasteries of such size as to impair the familial relationship between the abbot or abbess and the community of monks or nuns. On the other hand, a community might grow through laxness of observance, as a haven for indolence and idleness. Mere numerical bulk is not an indication of fidelity to Christ’s call — for a religious community, a parish, or a church. As it is written, “Enter by the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is easy, that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard, that leads to life, and those who find it are few.” (Matt. 7:13-14)

The introduction of strict or spartan reforms has led to winnowing of members in the past. But a marked decline in membership — when no new strict observance has been introduced in a community — must be noted with care, as a possible warning signal. Given the membership declines in Episcopal communities it is obvious why the viability of the religious life in the Episcopal Church might seem questionable, and why many Episcopalians are either ignorant of or bemused by the more and more restricted activities of this tiny minority. How did this come about, and how can it be changed?

What is the religious life, anyway?

Most simply stated, the religious life is a life lived in voluntary compliance with a rule, which commonly includes the making of solemn promises or vows to observe the “evangelical counsels”: poverty, chastity and obedience. The root of *religion* is *ligare*, “to bind”: religious are *bound* by their rule. This rule might be observed in common with others, by an individual under spiritual guidance, or — rarely — by an experienced soul living alone. The common factor is dedication of the individual to something larger than the self, a giving up of the self to God.

One of the problems in dealing with the religious life is the word *religious*. The word — as an adjective — has two meanings:

- d committed, dedicated, or consecrated to the service of God
- d bound by monastic vows.

It is clear that the second definition can be included in the first, and that the second definition, the one espoused by most traditional communities, is more limited. But both definitions are equally “correct.” This has created a situation in which the Brotherhood of Saint Gregory can refer to itself as a “religious community,” while at the same time a member of another community can say, with equal correctness, that the Brotherhood “*isn’t* a religious community.” Both are correct, given the definition they are using.

One can be quite narrow and make *religious* synonymous with *monastic* in the strictest sense of that word. Many are surprised to discover that not until the papal decree *Normæ* of 1901 were noncloistered women in the sisters’ orders considered *religious* in the technical sense in which the canons used the term. In fact, the sisters’ orders evaded imposition of cloister, which was required of all women “religious,” precisely *by refusing to use the term*. At the other extreme, Saint Francis, in his rule for the Third Order, broadened the term considerably, referring to “religious living in the world.”

In this essay *religious* is taken to mean “committed, dedicated or consecrated to the service of God,” whether by vow or solemn promise. The *character* of the vow or promise is that it confirms, effects or sanctions the commitment, dedication, or consecration.

Being “religious” does not necessarily involve the institutional church, or community life as such — the desert fathers and mothers did not obtain church sanction or community validation for their self-dedication.

The first manifestation of religious life in the church involved a public commitment on the part of individuals, to the exigencies, the demands, of the gospel. It was a commitment on the part of individuals, sometimes very cantankerous individuals, who originally had very little idea of forming a community but who were rather interested in gathering as individuals around a teacher on the way to perfection. (Fleming, Padberg 5f).

The evangelical counsels, the traditional triad of *poverty, chastity, obedience* (the *content* of the vows), have been given various interpretations through the centuries. Poverty, for example, could mean either *no goods at all* or *all goods in common*, depending upon whether one was Franciscan or Augustinian. There is wide variation in the understanding of the vows from one community to another. And this is only natural, since the vows are not the goal of religious life, but the means; and means should be adapted to meet the needs of the individuals and the world in which they live.

A model for diversity

In practice, the vows — and any Christian journey — can be lived out on a spectrum of *negation versus transformation*. The Outline of the Faith says, “The mission of the Church is to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ.”(BCP 855) The religious life is one of the structures by which this unification is sought, through the means of the vows.

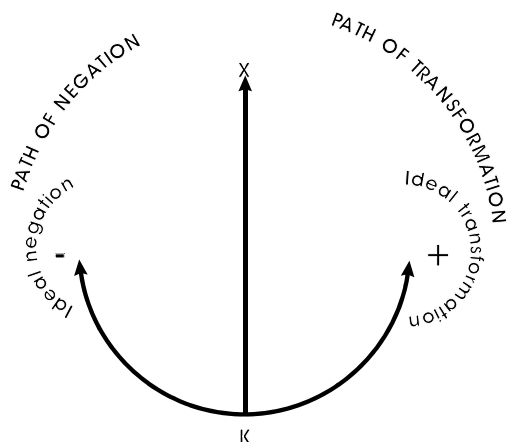
Essential to the idea of redemption is the call to repentance: the recognition that we are fallen and need to return to Christ, whose salvific act in becoming one with us enables us to become one with God. Part of this recognition of our fallen state involves our attitude towards what has been called “the world” — including lust for possessions, power, and misuse of sexuality. In the classic view common in the Middle Ages, as expressed in such works as *The Imitation of Christ*, there is a progression (a,b,c) from “the world” (indicated by *Kosmos*) to Christ (*Xristos*). On this “ladder of perfection” the religious



life was assumed to be “more consecrated” than secular Christian life.

At the start of the Modern Era the Council Fathers of Trent promulgated the teaching that the state of consecrated virginity was inherently better and holier than the married state. At the end of the Modern Era the Council Fathers at Vatican II taught that the religious life was no more a state of perfection than the Christian life in general. (Cada 49.)

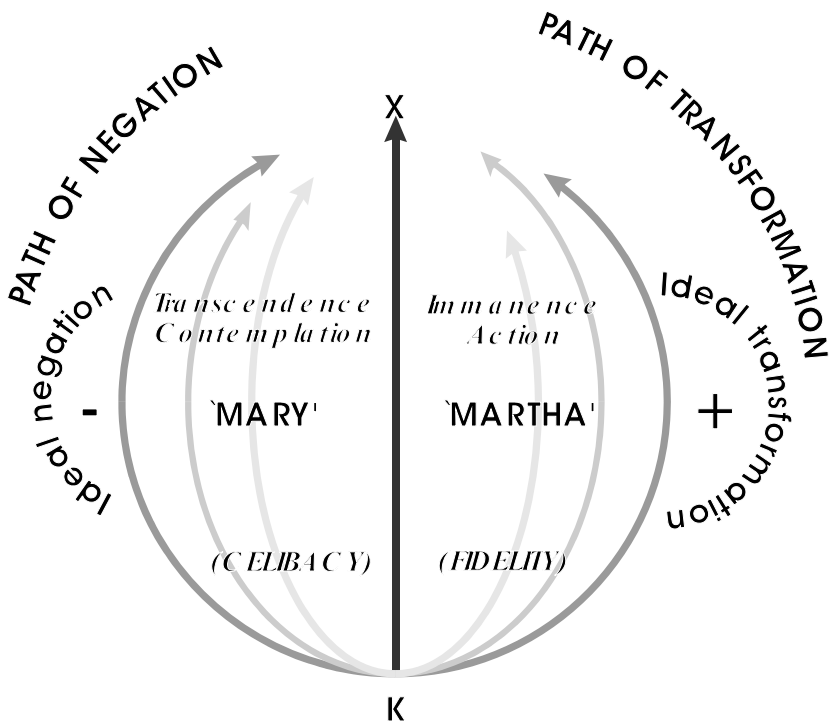
Thus, the church is beginning to recognize that there is no escape from “the world.” All living souls are in the world, like it or not. The figurative “flight from the world” was not so much a removal from the world as a means of dealing with the daily realities of life. The more telling phrase is *contempt for the world*: it is more a question of attitude than absence. In fact, one moves *through* the world, from birth to death; and there



is more than one way of dealing with this reality. In addition to the way of negation, which *seemed* to remove one from “the world” — but only substituted one set of material, social, and moral realities for others — there is the way of transformation; both are equally valid ways of dealing with reality, and the fallen condition.

The two approaches may be called Mary and Martha. They represent different attitudes toward reality, but their differences of approach should not obscure the fact that *Mary and Martha are sisters*. The way of negation, Mary, involves transcendence, detachment, and contemplation. The way of transformation, Martha, entails immanence, involvement, and action.

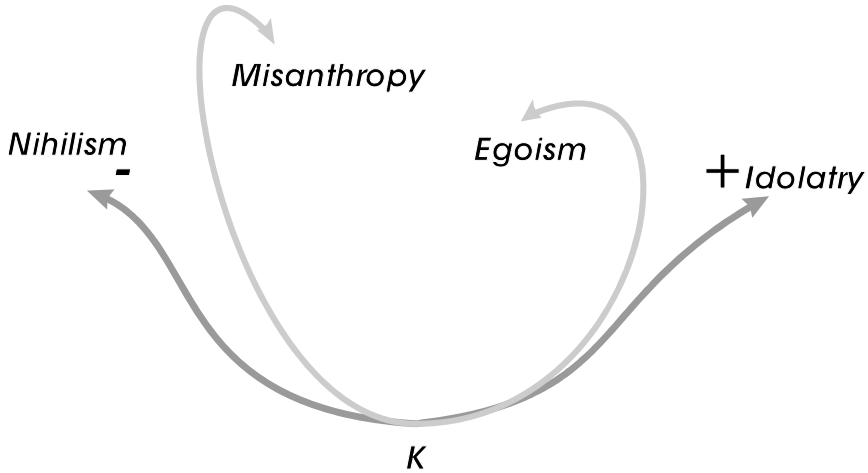
For example, sexuality may be dealt with in two ways: celibacy or fidelity. In the path of negation one has no relationships; in the path of transformation one has faithful relationships. Similar paths exist for dealing with wealth and power, and all other worldly matters, and there is often a wide range of possible choices. The Christian may turn away from the world in rejection, or turn the world itself around in transformation.



The important thing is the return to Christ. The initial direction is towards an ideal of negation or transformation, but the individual who seeks Christ must eventually turn away from these ideals, transforming or rejecting even them, after they have served their purpose. Failure to do so leads to any of the numerous heresies that plague the church, or to idolatry or egoism. One comes to deny the inherent goodness of God's creation, or become so entangled in it that rather than transforming it one is conformed to it.

Both paths, followed with faith, can bring one to God. The further along one is upon one's own path, the closer to others one grows, as all approach the One who is above all. Christians find that diversity of direction, if followed faithfully, avoiding the extremes which fall off the path on either side, leads them back to the source of life, in union with God and each other.

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The essence of the religious life, then, is the Christian quest writ — not large — but writ a certain way: it is the quest for union with God and neighbor; the vows are the means used to achieve this goal.

Originally the vows were not explicit: in the rules of the earliest religious, the hermits and the monastics (literally “desert-dwellers” and “lone-livers”), and the cenobites (“common-livers”). Saint Benedict (d. 547) wrote a rule including obedience and communal poverty. His rule did not specify celibacy — but assumed it as part of the general conversion of life, and life in community. Benedict’s *Rule* became a model for the religious life up through the 12th century. At that point Saint Francis appeared on the scene and, witnessing the corrupt path that some religious houses had taken by building up property and temporal power, introduced the concept of radical poverty, in which not only the individual brothers, but the community itself, owned nothing, “neither a house nor a place nor anything at all.”(Reg.bul. VI.1) Francis’ rule was later sidestepped, and before his death his order was in possession of basilicas and monasteries.

But reform in the religious life goes hand in hand with reform and renewal in the church as a whole — and it is often the religious who take the lead. It is tempting — and common — to picture Francis rescuing religious life from its medieval torpor, but before Francis there were other waves of renewal within the monastic life. And the situation was not as dismal as it might seem.

However often some of the abbeys and monasteries through the many centuries needed reform and however lurid some of the stories of the monasteries of the time were, the church at that time often needed reform even more. The Benedictine monasteries and abbeys from the fifth to the twelfth centuries were oases of piety, order, stability and devotion in a world which seemed increasingly impious, disordered, unstable and practically, if not ideologically, irreligious. (Fleming, Padberg 6)

This is not to say that there were not corrupt Benedictine monasteries, or corrupt Franciscan convents, for that matter. The history of the religious life — like all of human history — has been filled with such ups and downs: ideals come into conflict with limitations both human and natural, corruption sets in, then a reformer comes along and the religious life undergoes a new cycle of renewal and revival. The Roman Catholic Church is going through such a process now, begun in 1965 with the Vatican II document *Perfectæ Caritatis* — perfect charity. The Episcopal Church — and its religious communities — are beginning to look to renewal and revival as well.

An historical approach

One way to approach renewal is to look at the past, to see how the problem was dealt with before. Those who are ignorant of history are doomed not to know when they are repeating it.

On examining the history of religious life, Lawrence Cada and other authors developed this thesis: In the history of religious life, as indeed in the history of the church and the world, there have been crucial turning points at which new ideas have emerged to meet the needs of the day. These “paradigm shifts” took the form of “dominant images” or models, usually instituted through a charismatic founder or group of founders. As James Clifton puts it,

The history of religious life has seen the rise of a succession of integrating images which have been the source of self-understanding, of theological reflection, of apostolic commitment, and of attractive power across the centuries. Thus the religious has been seen successively as desert father, monk in a large feudal monastic community, mendicant friar, counter-reformation soldier of Christ, and anti-sec-

ularist institution builder.

Each of these images has had its positive side and its day of overwhelming success in the history of the church. Each has also had its shadow side, with its excesses, and containing seeds of decay which eventually led to periods of decline. (Fleming, Clifton 30)

The Five Ages of the Religious Life			
The Time	The Place	The People	The Orders
200-500	The Desert	Antony, Pachomius	Hermits (<i>lone-livers</i>) of Egypt, develop into skete = "abba" and disciples
500-1200	The Monastery	Aidan, Columba, Basil, Benedict	Iona, Lindisfarne, Jarrow; Benedictinism with its own reforms: The 4 C's: Cluniac, Camaldolese, Carthusian, Cistercian
1200-1500	The Field	Francis, Dominic, Teresa of Avila	Mendicants: Franciscans, Dominicans, Carmelites; Military Orders: Templars
1500-1800	The Missions	Ignatius Loyola, Angela Merici, de Sales and de Chantal	Apostolic Orders: Jesuits, Ursulines; failed attempt at apostolic life by Visitation
1800-1960	The Schools and Hospitals	Vincent de Paul, Jean Baptist de la Salle	Teaching Congregations: SSND, Christian Brothers, Salesians; Nursing: Sisters of Charity, of Mercy

At each turning point, a religious community or communities emerged which so incarnated the dominant image that they could serve as icons of their age. Not all of them were new foundations. In some cases these were communities that had been around for a while and came into their own.

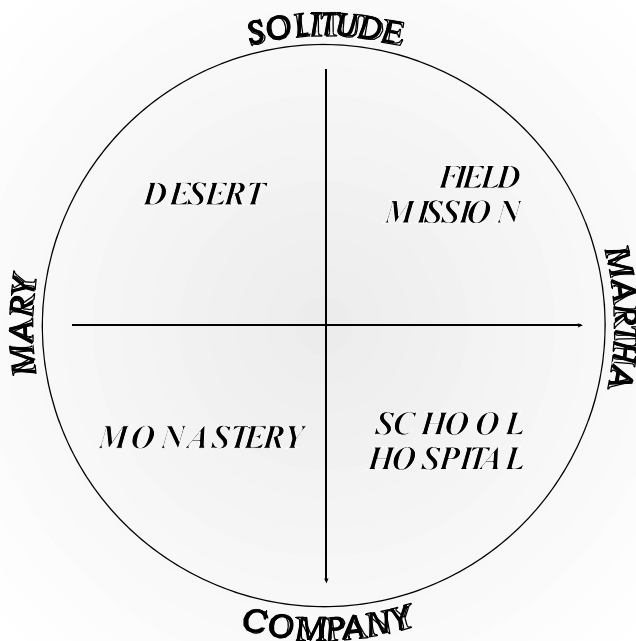
These communities were also sources of renewal for the church. As Cada notes, "Historically, in its renascent phase, religious life plays a strong prophetic role for the entire church." (Cada 8)

The table shows the five major divisions of the history of religious life, and the communities which express or typify the dominant image in each period. (An extended elaboration of this historical overview is provided in Cada 8ff.)

Though communities die out, once a form of religious life is established it seems to continue to find people called to it, though perhaps in decreasing

numbers. Thus, there are still a few hermits, a good number of monastics, and quite a few teaching communities. Only the military orders seem to have dropped completely from the scene — perhaps a reflection of their over-specialized nature.

New communities that come into being or flourish at the “turn of an age” tend to typify the age’s concerns, and often possess an extra element of vitality and staying power. So too, being newcomers who have to prove the need for their coming into being, they often incorporate a certain degree of “renewal attitude” as part of their initial charism. (This will be discussed to a greater extent below, in the section on Renewal.)



The community spectrum

It becomes clear in examining this history that there has been an oscillation between communities that are focused inward and those which are focused outward. The history of religious life appears to

offer a spectrum of possibilities: from the purely apostolic group, whose primary gaze is outward and looks to community life only as a necessary support for its work, to the monastic community which finds its first reference point in its inner religious life and only looks secondarily to whatever kind of outreach flows from the group. (Fleming, Clifton 33)

Like the Mary–Martha spectrum described above, this range can also be described as a continuum: the Solitude–Company range. If one combines the two continua in a coordinate system, one can place the spirit of a given community at an appropriate point on the graph shown on the previous page. For example, Franciscans place less stress upon community, more upon radical poverty, than do the Benedictines. These two religious types lie opposite each other on the chart on the previous page. So too, an anchorite is going to have a different spirit from that shared by a community which operates a large institution such as a school or hospital. This chart can be useful in placing each community within the circle of fidelity to the gospel mandate as it is perceived and acted upon by each community. It can serve as an icon for the unity in diversity that Paul encourages for the living church:

. . . Present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect. . . . I bid every one among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith which God has assigned him. For as in one body we have many members, and all the members do not have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; if service, in our serving; he who teaches, in his teaching; he who exhorts, in his exhortation; he who contributes, in liberality; he who gives aid, with zeal; he who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness. Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with

brotherly affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Never flag in zeal, be aglow with the Spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in your hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints, practice hospitality. — Rom 12:1-13

The function of religious life

The religious life is the individual response to a call from God to live in a certain way. It can include a recognition that the way of life to which one is called is the same as that to which others are called: this leads to the development of common rules and community life.

The *Tao* of religious life

But it is not the religious life which brings about the salvation of the members or the communities. Salvation is through Christ alone. It would be a kind of 20th century Phariseism to imply that salvation is to be obtained by obedience to a set of rules, though one still sometimes hears the religious life referred to as a “fuller commitment.” There was a time when, as Cada has noted, this was the official doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church: that the religious and clerical estates were inherently superior to the lay and secular; and that celibacy was superior to the married state. The Second Vatican Council softened this doctrine to a large extent, bringing it more into line with the concept of baptismal dignity, and avoiding the accusations of “supererogation” which had been leveled since the Reformation.

One primary recognition in modern theology of the church is that all commitment to Christ grows out of baptismal initiation. As McDonough notes, the religious life is “a life fundamentally based on the sacraments of initiation.” (McDonough 23)

This recognition has lowered the esteem some place on the religious life, particularly in the Roman Catholic Church, where the perceived disenthronement of the religious life has contributed to the decline in vocations. A Roman Catholic sister once said with some anger, “When I made my vows they said that religious life was a better way to reach God; that celibacy was superior to marriage. Now they tell me that it’s all the same. I feel betrayed!”

While this sister’s dismay is understandable given the shift in the official Roman Catholic teaching on the subject, a view of religious life as a “closer walk with God” should never have found root in the Anglican tradition, with its healthy suspicion of “salvation through works.” But the Brotherhood of Saint Gregory was once criticized by a member of one of the traditional orders who

said, “They only take the vows all Christians take at Baptism.” While this is far from true (the baptismal vows include worship, penance, witness, service and justice, BCP 304-5) what if it were? It is from the baptismal covenant that *any* Christian pilgrimage begins. To imply that one has fulfilled the baptismal covenant and is ready for more suggests an insufficient awareness of human limitation.

Religious follow their rules not so as to “become better Christians” but in order to respond to God’s call *for themselves*. The religious life is the response to a call from God to walk in a certain way; it is not the only way, but it is the way to which the individual feels called. God calls each and every Christian by his or her own special name, that no one knows but them and God. “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who conquers ... I will give a white stone, with a new name written on the stone which no one knows except the one who receives it.” (Rev. 2:17) There is no “better” in the kingdom of God, and what Christ asks of us is hard enough without adding human regulations. (And he said, “Woe to you lawyers also! for you load people with burdens hard to bear ...” (Luke 11:46) “... in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines human precepts.” (Matt. 15:9))

The rule is a means, a direction, an aid to the desired end; it is nothing more than that in itself. The religious life is a road, not a destination. In fact, the religious life is many roads, with one destination — Christ. It is a response made by an individual (though it may be shared with other individuals); not a formula for salvific success. At heaven’s gate we must shed all our habits; and even a cincture is too wide to go through the eye of a needle.

The uses of religious life

The religious life is certainly not meant to be a source of cheap skilled labor for the institutional church. This may be one of its *uses*, but that is not its purpose. Certainly the religious serve as they are called to serve, and at many times in the past the church, and civilization, have been guided by consecrated individuals. But this is a *by-product* of their consecration.

Nor is the religious life a vicarious source of prayer for the church. This is the attitude that Merton condemns in his later writings; he refers to it as the “prayer wheel” mentality, in which the religious life is seen as a sort of prayer factory churning out spiritual graces for the benefit of those too busy to pray, “a ‘dynamo of prayer’ in which the monks are generating spiritual power for the workers in the active ministry. If the active apostolate does not proceed from the apostle’s own union with God, the lack cannot be supplied by some-

body else.” (Contemplation 145) Grace by its very nature is freely offered, and the ability to pray is a participation in grace, not its cause — God is not a spiritual vending machine; nor is God impressed with the duration, or the quantity of prayer.

Witness and with-ness

What is the religious life then? It is two things: for the individual and for the community. For the individual it is a pattern for his or her Christian life. For the church as a whole, it is an example to the unskilled, a model for the skilled. Religious must be persons of prayer who can show others the way to pray. They must be willing servants who do what they can to help all Christians to achieve the goal of salvation in Christ. A religious brother or sister, monk, friar or nun, “should be a sign of freedom, a sign of truth, a witness to that inner liberty of the sons of God with which Christ has come to endow us.”(Contemplation 244) The religious are not off in some misty forefront of advance against the powers of darkness; they are walking alongside their fellow Christians, helping to bear the burdens on the way to God. (Gal. 6:2) They are not fathers and teachers but brothers and sisters. (Matt. 23:8-9) The major function of the consecrated life is to *witness* to, *proclaim* and *enable* the Christian life.

So who knew?

In the light of this fact, the poor showing on the part of the religious in the Episcopal Church is obvious. Who is responsible? Blame might be placed on the protestant party in the Episcopal Church, which distrusted the Romish qualities of some of the traditional religious communities. But are not those communities themselves to blame for allowing this distrust to develop? The early history of the religious life in the Episcopal Church was marked by actions which could not but polarize the faithful along party lines of “churchmanship.” The religious communities themselves must accept much of the blame for the current state of affairs. Just what is the relationship between the church and the religious communities?

Some history

It is impossible to write an exact history of the religious life in the Episcopal Church, particularly the early days, because the church lacked any central authority for dealing with religious, either as individuals or communities. The most it could do, for a few individual women, was to introduce (in 1889) the order of *deaconess* as a way of providing some form of external validation to the ministry of a few devoted women. (C&C 949f.) It is clear from the legislative history that the church was not ready to deal with sisterhoods or brotherhoods at this point.

Comings and goings

With the Catholic Revival of the mid–19th century, groups calling themselves religious orders, societies, or communities began to appear. Some of these foundations were sponsored by English communities seeking to broaden the influence of the Oxford Movement. The two essential facts to note are:

- d these communities were almost all involved in the apostolic life — in teaching, preaching, nursing, and work among the poor in the inner cities and slums;
- d they were not recognized by the church, which lacked (and was little interested in developing) any mechanism for such recognition.

Although suspicious, the church was partially won over by the good work that many of these communities did, operating under the auspices of individual bishops. These communities continued doing their work quietly for a number of years. Several were set up along Augustinian lines and consisted for the most part of priests who were engaged in the restoration or founding of Anglo-catholic parishes; most of the communities of women were engaged in teaching, nursing, or in work among “fallen women,” immigrants, and the poor. A few of them passed out of existence due to the departure of a superior or founder to the Roman obedience, but the largely protestant church membership would shrug and think, “What else could one expect?”

In 1907, the General Convention of the Episcopal Church amended Canon XIX to allow ministers of other denominations to preach with the permission of the diocesan bishop — the so-called “Open Pulpit” amendment. (C&C 918-27) Today this is seen as a positive step in the development of interdenominational dialogue, and it was passed by a substantial majority from all sides of the church, both High and Low. A few, however, found this too

much to bear, and departed for Rome. One can only wonder what all the fuss was about. It would seem true that the “legislation was the occasion — but not the cause — for this exodus.” (Gannon 128)

Among those departing (in 1909) were Fr Paul, founder and superior of the Friars of the Atonement, the Graymoor Friars, together with the whole community of friars and sisters. This in itself would not have caused much note beyond the usual tongue-clacking in *The Living Church*.

What brought the secession to public notice was the property scandal. The departing friars remained in possession of the substantial real estate on which their modest dwellings were built. Fr Paul had failed to vest the property in the bishop of the diocese, though it was claimed that this had been his avowed intent, so that “absolute poverty would not be an idle profession.” (Gannon 169) However, since he had not made this commitment, the title to the property remained his.

The Atonement Sisters were using property donated for their use. When they left the Episcopal Church, the persons who had given them the property asked that it be returned, since they had intended to aid in founding an Episcopal religious community. The sisters refused, and the matter went to court. The press was filled with the kind of nastiness an agnostic journalist dreams about, and a church journalist laments while counting the profits from extra subscriptions. The issue was finally settled, but the scars left were not soon forgotten.

The voice of authority

So the General Convention of 1913 decided that something had to be done both to provide for canonical recognition of religious communities and to prevent the repetition of such scandal — and such loss of prime property. The canon passed required:

- d that the community be recognized by the bishop of the diocese in which its mother house was resident, and that he have approval of any change in the rule or constitution;
- d that the church be recognized as supreme authority in matters of doctrine, discipline and worship;
- d that a community obtain episcopal permission for opening branch houses in other dioceses;
- d that priest-chaplains be licensed by and responsible to the diocesan;
- d that the Book of Common Prayer be used for administration of the sacraments;

- d that real estate and endowments be held in trust for the community as a body in communion with the church;
- d that clerical members be subject to all canons governing the clergy;
- d and that provision be made for the appointment of a bishop visitor, either the diocesan himself or by his permission, who would hear appeals and rule on the dismissal or release of full members.

The section dealing with real estate is a heritage of the property scandal, and the sections on authority and the Book of Common Prayer were aimed at curtailing the use of unauthorized eucharistic liturgies (the various missals popular among the catholic party).

These regulations can hardly be seen as unreasonably strict or binding to those who claim to live the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. The property clause is certainly not as strict as the one imposed by Francis of Assisi (that the community and its members are to own nothing at all), and is very like the compromise worked out in Francis' lifetime, whereby the Friars Minor made use of properties which were held in title by the church. As for the liturgical question, it is ironic that religious, who anciently strove for simplicity of worship, and were rather more puritan than ceremonial, should be caught up in such controversies. (See Dix 312-17)

Through this canon, the religious communities were now given the opportunity to receive official recognition by the church. None of the communities then in existence chose to do so. The church sought to solve this problem by dealing with one possible source of difficulty, and added a clause to the canon in 1919: "It shall not be within the power of a succeeding bishop to withdraw the official recognition that has been given to a religious community, provided, that the conditions laid down in this canon are observed." This addition addressed a fear on the part of some of the communities that a subsequent Low Church bishop might dissolve them. It did not, however, encourage any communities to seek recognition.

It is obvious that the religious of these communities, or at least their governing members — however *traditional* they may have thought themselves — were not prepared to live either under obedience or in poverty as they have been traditionally understood. By the 1950s, not a single community had sought recognition under the canons of the church. It was at that time that the Society of Saint Paul and the Community of the Holy Spirit were founded; and their founders insisted that they comply with the canonical requirements.

Where does the Brotherhood fit in?

A cleric from a traditional community once said,
“There’s more to the religious life than wearing a habit.”

The Brotherhood of Saint Gregory was founded in 1969; in accordance with the canon, its rule and constitution were approved by Bishop of New York Horace W. B. Donegan. The willingness of the Brotherhood to comply with the canons placed it in a very small minority among Episcopal religious communities. Another fact about the community was even more revolutionary, and set it apart from the traditional religious life altogether. This was its radical departure from an understanding of the evangelical counsels which had tended to limit the religious life only to the monastic model.

Such limiting and narrowing has been evident in church history before. The church of the third and fourth centuries “effectively reduced charisms from the rich variety found in the New Testament to a few specific ministries. Even religious life as a charism in the church was so effectively tied to the juridical institution that it almost completely lost its prophetic character.” (Cada 171f) So too, new orders fell under the spell of the old. “In the past, new forms of religious life inexorably fell under the influence of forms that had a longer and more prestigious history: Pachomians and Basilians became monks; canons regular and mendicants adopted a monastic or quasi-monastic way of life; apostolic congregations of women imitated cloistered nuns, etc.” (Fleming, Lozano 151)

The Brotherhood emerged in response to the limitations which, in the Episcopal Church, had been put in place not by the institution, but by the religious communities, who remained, with few exceptions, a law unto themselves. Most of them were still operating under a model of religious life that was firmly rooted in the 19th century, with (in some cases) strong echoes of the Middle Ages.

How was the Brotherhood’s rule different from the traditional rules? The most obvious and — from the traditional standpoint — most radical change involved the vow of chastity.

Chastity

The Brotherhood does not equate chastity with celibacy (or celibacy with chastity, for that matter). The Brotherhood Rule describes chastity in the following way:

A brother makes the vow of chastity as follows: Chastity is the decision to live with all in love, with respect for each person's integrity. It is not a denial of one's sexuality and capacity for love, but a dedication of the whole self to God: free from indecency or offensiveness and restrained from all excess, in order to be free to love others without trying to possess or control.

The living out of this vow — its *content* — is about the right use of one's sexuality, combined with respect for the dignity of one's spouse or partner. Some members of the community are married, with children; others live in covenanted life-long relationships.

Chastity versus celibacy

Some say that this understanding of chastity places the Brotherhood outside of the religious life altogether. That would, however, be inconsistent with Anglican tradition. It is commonly held that the community of Little Gidding which Nicholas Ferrar established in the 17th century marks the first Anglican experiment with religious life. As *Lesser Feasts and Fasts* puts it in the biography of Nicholas Ferrar, Little Gidding “became an important symbol for many Anglicans when religious orders began to revive.” While Nicholas and “the two sisters” were celibate, the community at Little Gidding also included married members.

Nor is the Brotherhood's understanding of chastity out of keeping with a far older and more significant tradition. It is possible for a married person to achieve the epithet, “Spouse of Christ” — according to Saint Francis, who was the first to found a religious order with married members (the Order of Penance, or Third Order). In his *Letter to the Faithful*, which is the earliest extant articulation of the Third Order's rule, Francis says, “We are spouses when the faithful soul is joined to our Lord Jesus by the Holy Spirit.” (Ep.fid. 8) In this period, a high point for the church in terms of breadth and charity of vision,

the married laity ceased being referred to as “children and weaklings who simply cannot embrace celibacy” (an oft-repeated phrase in early ecclesiastical texts), and were instead spoken of as persons who profess the “common rule,” that is, the Gospel. The Third Orders of

the thirteenth century owe their existence, in part, to this change of mentality. (Fleming, Lozano 150)

Since that time, the Roman Catholic Church has narrowed its definition of chastity considerably. Chastity is defined as entailing “perfect continence in celibacy.” (Code 599) The option for a chaste marriage or relationship is ruled out for religious. In this case, as with *religious*, a word with a common meaning has been given a “special” narrower and more limiting meaning.

The Brotherhood accepts *chastity* with its common meaning. All Christians are called to live chastely. The Brotherhood takes this universal call and *stabilizes* and *regulates* it by means of the vow. This understanding of chastity has an evangelical side: rather than being a strain on the community, marriage opens the possible influence of the religious life to a wider field.

Further questions on celibacy

It is not the Brotherhood’s intent to question the validity of any individual’s vow of celibacy, if he or she is responding to a call, and empowered by a charismatic gift for celibacy. However, the utility of celibacy for the mission of the church — and remember, that’s all that counts — must be examined.

Is celibacy really that important, from either a practical or spiritual point of view? The reason given for the celibate life is usually that it allows the celibate to focus his or her entire being on God. Paul argued with the Corinthians, “I want you to be free from anxieties. The unmarried man is anxious about the affairs of the Lord, how to please the Lord; but the married man is anxious about worldly affairs, how to please his wife.” (1 Cor. 7:32-33) Does not this imply that were it not for celibacy their entire being would be focused on sex? Many celibates find that they still have anxieties, if not with spouses, then with their work, their fellow community members, their families, the government, and so on. Most people find the weather more of a distraction than they do the sexual impulse — they certainly talk about it enough — and healthy sexual relationships do not seem to have deterred many great and wise people from devoting themselves to God.

How valid is it, then, to declare celibacy the limiting criterion of the evangelical counsel of chastity? The scriptural support for celibacy is rather vague: Paul explicitly says that his opinions on the subject, noted above, are completely his own — “concerning the unmarried, I have *no command of the Lord*, but I give *my opinion* as one who by the Lord’s mercy is trustworthy” (1 Cor. 7:25) — and even then he makes it clear that celibacy is not for every-

one. All of this must be tempered by the context in which Paul is writing: he is giving advice for the *eschaton* — “for the form of this world is passing away” (1 Cor. 7:31) — not for today, and certainly not for all times. By the time of the later Pastoral Epistles, the pressure for celibacy has been tempered by an awareness that the form of the world is *not quite* passing away. The author points out that he would rather young people marry and settle down, rather than attempting the difficult celibate life:

But refuse to enrol younger widows; for when they grow wanton against Christ they desire to marry, and so they incur condemnation for having violated their first pledge. Besides that, they learn to be idlers, gadding about from house to house, and not only idlers but gossips and busybodies, saying what they should not. So I would have younger widows marry, bear children, rule their households, and give the enemy no occasion to revile us. For some have already strayed after Satan. (1 Tim. 5:11-15)

The true call to the celibate life

None of this should be taken as a criticism of those who have chosen to follow a rule requiring celibacy. For those called to it, celibacy is the appropriate way. But celibacy is a gift, a charism. As our Lord says, “Let those accept it *who can*.” (Mt 19:12) Some who have attempted celibacy without having the charism for it (for it is clear that this is what it takes) become embittered and unhappy, sinning in their hearts or bodies and thereby breaking their vow.

The requirement of religious celibacy is consistent with the current Roman Catholic view on clerical celibacy. But surely the Anglican tradition has always been to allow marriage for the clergy, and even Rome is considering this (however distantly or discreetly), which should make it clear that celibacy itself is not a theological (or evangelical) but a disciplinary issue, in spite of attempts to exalt it. It would seem, then, that to require celibacy as an essential element of religious life in an Anglican setting — or perhaps in any setting — is inappropriate.

The weakness with this definition is its narrowness — it limits chastity to simply never having, nor desiring sex. (See Matt. 5:28, with its echo of the Tenth Commandment: “But I say to you that every one who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.”) To single out one aspect of human nature for such rigorous control is a perverse accident of moral history. Chastity is a matter of personal integrity — custody of the whole person. In this light, chastity governs all emotional aspects of the per-

sonality. Anger, impatience, envy, despondency, despair, hatred, as well as lust and vanity — these are the enemies of chastity. As Friar Giles said, “My brother, I tell thee that the diligent custody and continual watching of our bodily and spiritual senses, keeping them pure and spotless before God — that is truly called chastity.” (Fioretti 286)

Poverty

The Brotherhood Rule says this about poverty:

A brother makes the vow of poverty by dedicating a major portion of the fruit of his labor to the Church and to the Brotherhood.

This understanding of poverty departs from traditional practices far less than one might imagine at first. Poverty is defined in the Roman Catholic canons as entailing “besides a life which is poor in fact and in spirit, a life of labor lived in moderation and foreign to earthly riches, a dependance and a limitation in the use and disposition of goods according to the norm of the proper law [i.e., the rule] of each institute.” (Code 600) The Brotherhood also follows, in part, the Franciscan notion of property, in that the community owns no real estate. Individually, the members of the community are called to provide for themselves and the (and their families, if such be the case) from their work in the world, and contributing at least the biblical tithe for the use of the church and the community in its collective works. In addition, professed brothers contribute a portion of their annual income to a fund designated for the use of brothers who may be in financial distress. As a final note of self-sacrifice, the community designates a portion of its annual purse for the education and development of individual brothers, supporting them in educational programs and ministry development; and further gives away to charitable ends half of any income over expenses accumulated in any given year.

This modern interpretation is not so far from the vow of poverty as it was lived under Francis’ rule, except that he did not allow his brothers to handle money or to own anything at all: “The brothers who know how to work should do so and exercise that trade which they [already] know . . . and they may have the tools and instruments suitable for their trades.” This work was the main source of food and supplies for the friars, and they were only to seek alms as a last resort. (Reg.prim. VII)

True poverty manifests itself in a spirit of detachment rather than in external impoverishment. Saint Gregory, in one of his homilies, describes how one may “make use of the things of this world without being possessed by them.”

(Hom. in Evang. 2.36) This is key to the Brotherhood's understanding of poverty: that poverty is giving up control over the disposition of all or a portion of one's goods.

Poverty is the opposite of ownership. To renounce "personal" possessions in exchange for life on a well-situated country estate is not necessarily true poverty; in such a situation the religious are in danger of becoming "personally poor but collectively rich." (Holl 53) Similarly, to understand poverty as "goods held in common" fails to preserve the sense of *loss*, of *giving up*, that the word *poverty* denotes. If the disposition of goods still remains under the control of the individual or the group, is poverty being experienced?

For the Brotherhood, poverty also has a spiritual side. Poverty of spirit is the ability to give up not only things, but ideas, notions and habits. Poverty is not the bare *lack* of things, but the *giving up* of things; it is the freedom to use the things of the world without fear of being possessed by them, because they are used in a spirit of detachment, a willingness to give up and let go. The cloister is no sanctuary from possessiveness. As Merton points out, "contemplatives take a short view of their vocation, one that is almost 'materialistic' (emphasis on walls, grilles, veils, withdrawal, mutism)." (Contemplation 152)

Add to that list: rites, customs, habits, ceremonies — the insidious "possessions" of the religious. Emotional attachment to these is contrary to true poverty. Francis once chastised a brother who wanted a copy of the psalter, saying, "You won't let up until you get permission for a breviary. As soon as you have that, you'll sit down in an armchair like a high-and-mighty prelate and order your brothers thus: 'Bring me my breviary!'" He took a handful of ashes, and rubbed them into the novice's head, while saying, over and over again, "I am your breviary!" (Spec.perf., c4 174) As Francis also said, "The spirit of the flesh . . . does not seek a religion and holiness in the interior spirit, but it wishes and desires to have a religion outwardly apparent to people. And these are the ones of whom the Lord says, 'Truly . . . they have received their reward.'" (Reg.prim. XVII)

Obedience

The Brotherhood Rule says this about obedience:

A brother makes the vow of obedience to Jesus Christ as his only Lord and Savior, to the articles of faith as contained in the Creeds of the Church, to the Rule of the Brotherhood, and to the Superior General and the masters appointed over him.

All religious know that obedience is the “hard one.” This is because it directly faces the worst of all sins, pride. Poverty and chastity meet their hardest obstacle in the will — and it is through obedience that the will is tamed.

As a statement of corporate respect for the authority of the church, the Brotherhood further “observes the doctrine, discipline and worship of the Episcopal Church as the supreme authority under which it functions in obedience. The doctrine and worship of the Episcopal Church is set forth in the Book of Common Prayer, and authorized additions and supplements thereto. The discipline of the Episcopal Church is set forth in its Constitution and Canons.”(BSG Constitution III)

This recognizes the fact that obedience is not simply a matter of compliance with external authority. It is only through the obedience of its members that any institution functions well. The institution does not even properly *exist* apart from its members. Authority and obedience flow both to and from the same people, in a living exchange. This exchange takes on a spiritual aspect when the institution in question is the church. It is not the authority of the institution which preserves the church, but the Holy Spirit engendering faith in the hearts of believers which leads them to preserve the institution, in recognition of the fact that the institution’s existence is helpful to the mission of salvation.

Christian obedience is not a matter of hierarchical dominance and submission, but of loving service one to another, in Christ. But this loving service works in an orderly way. As canon lawyer Daniel Stevick notes,

We cannot act capriciously; we are under authority. As Christians, we shall seek obedience to the Christian revelation. As Christians in the catholic lineage, we shall seek loyalty to the long, continuous heritage from the early centuries. But, at last, what the Christian revelation as understood in the catholic inheritance would direct for our present situation is not so unambiguous but that we must use the best help at hand and act on our own . . . The self-governing church declares its intention to work creatively and imaginatively for its primary ends, but to work in an orderly, disciplined, law-abiding way. High purposes cannot be served by unrestrained, lawless associations of self-willed people.(Stevick, 14)

The nature of community

The Brotherhood has been criticized by some for not living “in community,” by which traditionalists mean living at least in twos or threes. The root of the word *monastic*, however, means “alone,” and so the earliest religious lived. The idea that religious must live in groups under one roof is a later development, and goes not only against the common sense notion, “A house is not a home,” but against the history of the religious life, which often involved solitaries and missionaries who did not live in community.

[In the 1917 Code of Canon Law, cc. 487, 580, 594, 606] the “commonness” of communal life had two meanings according to the canonists: 1) belonging to the same juridic person governed by the same rule and superior, and 2) actually dwelling in the same lodging and sharing the same facilities with some other members (min. 3) of the same juridic person. Only the first meaning could be considered essential to religious life, because otherwise solitary ascetics could not belong to the category of “religious” and this would be contrary to the entire history and understanding of religious life as such. (McDonough 58)

The missionary activities of the Franciscans were not a denial of community or cloister. They were an extension of it. As Francis said, “Wherever we go or stay we have with us a cell. Brother Body is our cell, and the soul sits in it like a hermit and thinks of God . . .” (Spec.perf. 121)

Community spirit transcends geography. In fact, proximity is often harmful to community — especially if it is the sole defining mark of community. The stifling oppression of the “common room” in which old dislikes are brooded and nursed is more like a scene from Sartre than a vision of the ideal Christian life style. As Sr Clare Fitzgerald, SSND, once told a retreat, “They used to tell me, as long as I was in that common room for a certain number of hours a day, I was experiencing community. Well, that *wasn't* community!”

No one would claim that a biological family ceases to be a family when the children grow up and leave home. In fact, the concept of *family* is expanding and taking on new shades of meaning in the face of changes in society. Single-parent families, same-sex couples, intentional communities, and solitary persons are challenging the traditional notion of “family” — and just as this concept is growing, so too is the concept of *community*.

None of this is meant to suggest that there is no need for local community: on the contrary, “No one, let alone a person committed to one or more persons

in a family, in matrimony or in a celibate community, can work out his or her own development without reference to solidarity to others. Anyone who persists in trying to evade solidarity will end up psychologically warped or stunted.” (Fleming, Lozano 137) Community is vital to the Christian enterprise: to bring all people into unity with Christ and each other.

The common life of religious, regulated by traditional observances and blessed by the authority of the Church, is obviously a most precious means for sanctification . . . But it is still only a framework. As such, it has its purpose. It must be used. But the scaffolding must never be mistaken for the actual building. (Life 55)

For the Brotherhood, and others living in extended or nonlocal community, new means of maintaining community spirit substitute for the old locality-oriented spirit. The Brotherhood seeks to “evolve new forms of community that offer a tangible sense of belonging and a depth of support even though the members may be widely scattered for the sake of mission.” (Fleming, Clifton 34)

The limiting idea of “community = locus” was an odd one for the church to adopt in any case. To the liberated Christian no place is especially holy: Peter wanted to build booths on the mountaintop, but he didn’t know what he was talking about. (Lk 9:33) If the eucharist teaches us anything, it is that the Body of Christ is not bound by time and space. The conclusion of the eucharistic rite assures us that it is in separating, going forth into the world, that we are fulfilling our baptismal — and religious — covenant.

Some more history

This detour into the philosophy of the Brotherhood was necessary to gain an understanding of events between 1969 and 1982. Some came about through the Brotherhood’s ignorance of the lack of canonical recognition by nearly all the traditional religious communities. To understand the history of the religious life in the Episcopal Church it is necessary to backtrack to 1949, and the foundation of the Conference on the Religious Life in the Anglican Communion in the United States of America and Canada. This association eventually persuaded the church to bring the canons into line with the practice of the Conference members.

Closed Conference

The Conference’s avowed aim, at its foundation, was to “spread information about the religious life in the American church, to encourage its growth,”

provide for “mutual cooperation among religious themselves” and “foster an understanding between the communities and the church at large.” (ARC 34) In its educational function it has met with little success. It carries out this function largely by producing occasional directories which list the names of its members, appearing in a booth at General Convention, and from time to time producing rather tepid and quaint video productions. Its attempts at encouraging growth are hardly likely to bear much fruit, since most of its constituents are declining in membership. Perhaps because it did not see what the Brotherhood was trying to do as having anything to do with the religious life, the Conference was of no help to the Brotherhood in its early formative years.

When in its early years the Brotherhood of Saint Gregory sought membership in and support from the Conference, it was told that the Conference constitution did not allow the Brotherhood to be a member. The Brotherhood was not informed as to precisely why, and it never sought to raise the point that the *church* recognized it as a religious community, since the Brotherhood assumed the church recognized the Conference and its members as well — else how could they call themselves by the title they used? It appears from subsequent dialogue that the main reason for not allowing the Brotherhood membership was not so much the question of celibacy, but the concern over the style of “life in community.”

Behind the scenes, however, the Conference was active in another way, and at the General Convention of 1976 a substitute canon on the religious life was introduced and adopted. The Brotherhood of Saint Gregory, at that time one of the few recognized religious communities in the Episcopal Church that actually had complied with the canons, was not consulted nor even informed of this action. Only two Conference member communities had been recognized by the church, along with the Brotherhood and the Order of the Holy Family (which had also been excluded from participation in the Conference.)

The “Spirit of ‘76”

What were the changes in the canon submitted by the Conference? The changes were sweeping, and radically altered the form and content of the canon. The major change, which allowed the previously unrecognized communities to retain their property, became the first section of the new canon: the community is allowed to hold “possessions in common or in trust,” and is exempted from the canon which requires diocesan approval for

alienation or encumbrance of real property by all other institutions of the church. Celibacy is required, and “life in community” — which is not defined. Obedience is to the rule and constitution of the community — no mention is made of the doctrine, discipline, and worship of the church, nor of the Book of Common Prayer. Recognition is granted through a committee of the House of Bishops, rather than the diocesan, and a minimum of six professed members is required. The remainder of the provisions are essentially unchanged.

This canon limited the term *religious* only to monastic or conventual communities. There was no mention of any other form of vowed life. Not only was the Brotherhood excluded, but if this canon had been in effect throughout Christian history, the following could not have been recognized under it: Antony of Egypt and Julian of Norwich (and in fact almost all the desert fathers and mothers, and every solitary hermit and anchorite since); the idiorhythmic monks of Mount Athos, and other religious of the Eastern Orthodox tradition; the earliest Franciscans, and other itinerant missionary preachers and mendicants; the great missionary societies, including the Jesuits; and, worst of all, Nicholas Ferrar and the community at Little Gidding, the fountainhead of the revival of religious life in the Anglican Communion!

However, this was a canon that the Conference members (at least those with six or more members) could live with, and between 1976 and 1982, most of those who could be recognized finally took their place as canonically recognized religious orders in the Episcopal Church.

Where the Brotherhood stood

The Brotherhood was in an unusual position at this point — it had been granted canonical recognition under the canon passed in 1913. The passage of the new canon raised a question: was it still recognized? And what of any other community that might come along with similar ideas? The canon as it stood would render new foundations along these lines impossible. The Brotherhood felt, for the reasons stated above, that the requirement of celibacy is inappropriate in this church, but it seemed that there was little that could be done in the meantime. The Conference at this point dropped the Brotherhood from its occasional published listing of religious communities in the Episcopal Church. Since the Brotherhood was still listed in the *Church Annual*, however, troubling the Conference further was deemed unnecessary.

At this time the Brotherhood became aware of a group of women who, like it, did not see marriage as an impediment to doing the Lord's work while under religious commitment — the Worker Sisters of the Holy Spirit. Sr Angela, the founder of the Worker Sisters, and Br Richard Thomas, founder of the Brotherhood, decided not to let matters rest. News eventually reached Angela and Richard Thomas about other communities, not quite like theirs, but similar to the Little Gidding community, or to the Jesuits, some of them having been in existence — but without recognition — for decades. All these communities were now incapable of recognition by the church.

Angela and Richard Thomas began to think about submitting a further amendment to the canon on the religious life that would allow the option for recognition of either “traditional” or “contemporary” religious communities. Angela wrote a draft which was submitted to the House of Bishops Standing Committee on Religious Communities. This draft left the current canon essentially unchanged as the first section of the proposed canon. The second part of the proposed canon was similar in wording to the first, with the omission of the clause on “celibate life in community” and “possessions in common or in trust.” Communities recognized under the first section were to be called “Traditional Religious Orders” and those under the second part “Contemporary Religious Orders.” Since this new canon would not in any way affect the Conference member communities, Angela and Richard Thomas did not seek to involve them in this revision. Thus, the Conference was unaware of this draft amendment until the beginning of the General Convention 1982.

Makes the heart sad

Imagine the surprise on reading the following in a 1985 publication of the Order of Saint Helena — one of the Conference member communities — written by the Prior of the Society of Saint Paul: “. . . in 1982 a proposed revision to the canon was made, supported by the Conference membership which recognized the growth and development of religious communities other than those which were specifically monastic in character A second part to the canon was created for other Christian communities with the help of a Conference on the Religious Life task force working in cooperation with the House of Bishops Committee for Religious Communities.” (It was partly in response to the publication of this revisionist article that the original *Special Report* was published by the Brotherhood in August 1985.)

For in fact, not only was the Conference unaware of the proposed canon, but its representatives at the General Convention were hostile to its introduction and passage once they became aware of it. There were a series of private meetings by the Conference, to which Angela and Richard Thomas were not invited. The representative of the Order of Saint Helena was not invited either (it seems that this order was seen by some of the other Conference members as too “contemporary”!).

Animosity in the hallways of the convention center followed. The “old orders” didn’t seem to understand that their part of the canon was unchanged, and that all the newer communities wanted was to introduce the possibility for canonical oversight of “nontraditional” orders. A quote: “Why do you want to change *our* canon?” Another, addressed by a sister of a large traditional community to Sr Angela: “Why don’t you people just go away!?” After several days of this, the Conference was prevailed upon by the bishops’ committee to sit down face to face with Richard Thomas and Angela, and discuss their differences. A huge surprise was in store for them. It seems, after all this anxiety, that what most upset the Conference members was the use of four words: *traditional*, *contemporary*, *religious*, and *order*. They didn’t feel that these nonmonastic communities should call themselves “orders” or “religious”; they didn’t like what seemed to be implied in the terms “traditional” and “contemporary.” In a closed-door meeting the Conference members decided to rename the two sections for “religious orders” and “other Christian communities.” Angela and Richard Thomas were not pleased with the title “Christian communities,” which is vague, nor with the structure of the canon, which in its title included religious orders *as* Christian communities and then went on to describe them as if distinct. But in the interests of getting something through they agreed to these minor changes. The canon passed the House of Bishops unanimously; the bishops sang the doxology.

The Brotherhood reapplied for recognition under the new canon, and was for the second time canonically established. At the same time several of the other already existing “Christian communities” were recognized.

The Conference again

In the same article quoted above, the author states: “The Conference . . . seeks to help new groups in formation when asked to do so, whether they be monastic orders or Christian communities.” In fact, after 1982 neither the Brotherhood nor the Worker Sisters were asked to participate in the activities of the Conference. No ongoing form of consultation or exchange of ideas was

instituted until many years later when the growing number of “Christian Communities,” at the recommendation of the House of Bishops’ Standing Committee, formed its own voluntary association, The National Association of Episcopal Christian Communities (NÆCC). At the time, and to this day, the Conference constitution limited its membership essentially to monastic communities. The questions that remained to be answered at that time were:

- d By what authority did the Conference operate?
- d Who was the Conference to set its constitution against the canons of the church? and
- d Was the Conference actually able to carry out its work?

Almost half of the members of the Conference were not recognized or recognizable under the canons. Many of them had fewer than the required six members, some as few as two. By what right did these groups speak for the “religious life in the Anglican Communion in the United States and Canada”?

The time had long since come for the realization that the Conference, as then constituted, had failed to accomplish its tasks. Its utility to its own members was questionable. If it was unwilling even to *listen* to new ideas in a formal and ongoing way, or to allow itself to pass under criticism (which is the only way to renew) then what good could it do? Its constitution did not allow it to become involved in the internal affairs of any of its constituent members; so if some “tough love” were called for — and many would say it was — there was no way to administer it.

The Brotherhood felt it must call upon the Conference to rewrite its constitution to be in line with the canons of the church, and to provide for the kind of creative ongoing dialogue that so plainly was needed. The Conference was to have a triennial meeting just prior to the General Convention of 1985. In the original *Special Report*, which came out before the Anaheim gathering, the Brotherhood suggested these changes to the Conference:

- d That membership of the Conference consist of the senior member (superior, prior, moderator) of every canonically recognized religious order and Christian community, or an appointed delegate.
- d That representatives of newly formed or forming groups, or older communities now unable to meet the canonical requirements for recognition, be allowed to participate in a nonvoting capacity.

A new Pentecost — or a flash in the pan?

When the *Special Report* was published, the Brotherhood had no way of knowing what the response would be. The response turned out to be better than hoped for, though not as good as it might have been. What looked like a turning point loomed ahead; but it is clear that time would pass before the corner was turned.

A change in the atmosphere was evident at the 1985 General Convention in Anaheim. Several of the representatives of the “old orders” expressed gratitude to the Brotherhood for having had the courage to broach the subject. Others welcomed the challenges to reexamine their own living out of the vows, particularly in the area of property ownership. As one sister said, “You’ve rattled our cages; and we needed it.”

In addition, the Conference issued a statement clarifying its purpose. This statement, presented by its president, Fr Andrew Rank, SSP, at a meeting of the House of Bishops Committee on Religious Communities, declared limits to the work of the Conference: it would focus its attention on religious communities *devoted to communal living*. This refinement in the definition of the Conference’s goals and aims was a positive development, in that it narrowed the field of concerns, and clarifies the criteria for membership.

But this decision by the Conference, and its later restructuring as a renamed “Conference of Anglican Religious Orders of the Americas” (CAROA) — has proven to be far less than what was needed to bring renewal of religious life to the Episcopal Church. The hope had been that the Conference, as an already existing body and the most logical candidate, would choose to become an Episcopal equivalent of the Roman Catholic Conference of Major Superiors. But at least the Conference’s declaration and restructuring served as formal notice that it *does not* represent all religious communities.

In the meantime, the Brotherhood was invited, from time to time, to participate in meetings with representatives from the Conference and non-Conference communities, usually at the request of the chair of the House of Bishops’ Committee, and often to address common concerns, such as a form for annual reporting to that Committee on the health of the various communities. The old orders have begun to realize that their former stance as “experts” who want — as the 1985 article in the Saint Helena’s publication said — “to help new groups in formation” has not borne much fruit. Certainly the past has shown newer types of orders picking up customs from the older, established ones. But “in our times, the trend seems to be running

in the opposite direction: the traditional forms of religious life are getting closer to the life-style of the secular institutes.” (Fleming, Lozano 151) This is certainly true of the Anglican orders as well: Bishop Walter Dennis, when visitor of the Brotherhood, as it was beginning to take on some ministries that involved brothers living and working together on a common project, noted that at the same time some of the old orders were sending their brothers and sisters out to church-related employment, some even housing them independently in apartments and rectories. As he put it, “You are passing each other!”

Those changes were still to come. In 1985, however, a member of one of the Conference orders criticized the *Special Report*, saying that the Brotherhood and Worker Sisters were like hockey players wanting to join a tennis club and then change all the rules. The Brotherhood never suggested that traditional religious give up their understanding and exercise of the vows as entailing celibacy, life in community, and communal property. What it called upon them to do is to be faithful to their rules, while understanding that there is more to religious life than their notion of it. The Brotherhood suggests that perhaps instead of a tennis club, a *sports complex* might better meet the needs of the Episcopal Church. In a church so diverse and colorful, it seems a shame to focus on monasticism rather than broadening out to include all sorts of committed Christian life. This would come to bear fruit in the late years of the 90s and the early years of the 21st century, with the formation of NÆCC, which provided a parallel organization open to any and all communities, though consisting mostly of the “Christian Communities.” Regular interchanges and guest visits between NÆCC and CAROA now take place, and this work is beginning to show the promise of some renewal.

It has taken a while for the “old orders” to realize that the newer communities have something to offer exactly because they *are* different. Joseph Campbell has noted that the seeker on a classic quest must break old rules in order to bring healing to the society which sent the seeker on the quest. Even hockey players can tell when tennis is being badly played. Working together we can see many problems in the all of our varied communities; and joint observations on these dysfunctions might prove helpful, by calling upon the communities to be open to renewal, to become aware of the maladies that afflict any institutional structure. The church is the Body of Christ, infused by the Holy Spirit, but that does not prevent the institution from behaving like any other institution at times.

Not infrequently, Christians have thought that “divinely instituted” meant that the church is itself divine, a kind of superhuman or supernatural institution which is not ultimately subject either to the limitations of human nature or the effects of human sin. Such a picture, however, is very far from the one which the New Testament gives us. In Scripture, the church frequently portrays itself as a whole and its leaders in particular as going wrong in one way or another. (Norris 195)

What do the Brotherhood, and other new models, have to offer? And will the traditional orders allow themselves to become new wineskins for the new wine of the coming age of religious life?

Renewal: beyond the necessary

Renewal is a willingness to be reborn, to change, and to adapt. It is also a recognition of the fact that institutions and organizations follow a life pattern: they come into being, they grow, change, and sometimes die. Institutional structures are like tools. One uses the right tool for the right job. Like most tools, institutions need occasional tune-ups and reforms. When a knife loses its edge, it must be sharpened.

The life of an institution

One can divide the life pattern of an organization into five basic periods, each marked by an emotional — one might say *cultural* — atmosphere. (Much of what follows derives from Cada *et al.*)

- d Foundation / *Vision*
- d Expansion / *Fervor*
- d Stabilization / *Complacency*
- d Breakdown / *Doubt*
- d Crisis / *Resolution*

Foundation / Vision

In the first stages of an organization, a person, or sometimes a small group of persons, has a vision or a dream or a yearning, which they manage to begin to live out. The founder(s) may not even be a “member” of the later institution; it is not unknown for institutions to take different courses than the founder intended, even during the founder’s lifetime — but this is not the norm. During this first generation the community grows, disciples come into the body, and share intimately in the vision of the founder(s).

Expansion / Fervor

The expansion phase can occur during the founder's lifetime, but most expansion normally comes in the second and later generations. Here the history and goals of the community begin to be transformed into myth. The ethos becomes more established through externally transmissible or tangible forms: stories, liturgies, written documents, artifacts, places, and so on. A renewal-conscious organization will try to keep its documents as flexible as possible, always focusing on the original vision rather than its implementations.

Stabilization / Complacency

In this phase the community begins to develop a sense of success, contentment, satisfaction, and accomplishment — “We’ve got it made.” Expressions of the ethos become firmly established, but begin to develop a bit of unreality around the edges. Questioning these outward forms is not encouraged, and is seen as an attack upon the ethos itself. “Even the most legitimate changes are rejected, and their proponents are righteously and intolerantly silenced.” (Cada 57) The driving and inspiring *myth* comes to be reduced instead to a *formula*.

By this point the community is far from the foundation; all of the people who knew the founder(s) are dead. The personal touch has been lost, and the modes of transmitting the charisma have begun to show signs of wear. A renewal-conscious organization will try to maintain as many human, person-based means of handing on the vision as possible, and will always be willing to reexamine them and recast them. “Charisms live in people, not in codes or constitutions or directories — however finely polished and legally sound. The charisma of an institute lives in its members, or it does not live at all.” (McDonough 40)

As Pope Paul VI noted,

Let us not forget that every human institution is prone to become set in its ways and is threatened by formalism. It is continually necessary to revitalize external forms with this interior driving force, without which these external forms would very quickly become an excessive burden. (Renewal 12)

Breakdown / Doubt

Breakdown is often brought on by a perception that things are not quite working. This perception may be accurate, or may result from dissatisfaction

with the organization, which finds its expression in doubt about the organization itself. There can be a drop-off of vocations, or a loss of membership through departure. The reasons given for these events take on the air of excuses rather than explanations. The orientation is not to problem-solving, but to excuse-making: “We don’t have many vocations, or so-and-so didn’t last, because ours is a high and noble calling.” While this may be perfectly *true*, members of the community begin to doubt its truth. An implied judgment lurks behind every departure: *You* were not right for *me*. Instead of accepting the fact that not every community can suit every person, the community begins to have doubts about itself.

Other issues that can bring about breakdown are the closing or loss of major works or programs, a loss of funding or other decrease in income — in short, any kind of external or internal problem. In a dysfunctional organization, instead of dealing with the problems as they arise, malaise is simply allowed to percolate and stew under the surface.

The four phases of doubt

There are four stages to the breakdown of a community, each characterized by a form of doubt: Mechanical, Conceptual, Moral, and Total.

Mechanical doubt: Are we doing things the right way?

Mechanical doubt is often the first response to problems in an organization, which has come to be seen not as a spirit-filled (or vision-inspired) community of people, but as a mechanism that needs adjustment. Changes at this point are usually superficial: changing the habit, trying out new liturgies. Of course, there’s nothing wrong with either of these things, if they grow out of a living spirit — and if they are responses to the real problems. But if they are last minute efforts to pump life into a comatose body, it is too late for such medications to be effective. In an organization which does not constantly seek renewal, these superficial changes are usually too late to do any good.

Conceptual doubt: Are we doing the right things?

At this stage it isn’t the manner of working that comes under doubt, but the work itself. Should we stop teaching, close down the school? These questions are more fundamental than the mechanical concerns described in the previous stage. If approached with a lack of insight, actions at this stage can lead to disaster. A rebound effect can occur at this point, and a siege mentality develop on the part of some of the members, or the community as a whole.

Any change becomes a fundamental threat not just to the ethos of the community, but to some even larger principle: the Faith, the Nation, the Cause. Such polarization can render productive renewal nearly impossible.

Moral doubt: Am I doing the right thing?

At this level of doubt the misgivings and apprehensions that have troubled the organization begin to be internalized by the individual members. Accommodations begin to be made by individuals who no longer accept the driving myth of the organization, or who have reached a point of cynicism. They begin to wonder whether they need to observe the rule with quite the rigor that it is suggested they should; in celibate communities this is a stage at which sexual immaturities can emerge. In the minds of more conservative members, change and renewal can come to be seen as personal threats to their well-being and identity, with a concomitant decline in self-worth.

Total doubt: Why am I / are we doing this at all?

At this stage personal and communal despondency and despair emerge full force, and the doubt shifts almost to an existential level. Organizations which have descended this far into doubt are unlikely to survive; though even here it is possible to rediscover the core ideal which drove the community.

Doubt as a tool for renewal

There is, of course, nothing wrong with doubt and questioning. Part of renewal means a continued openness to questions. But in a renewal-conscious organization doubt is ongoing, and is focused on real problems, rather than on vague anxieties. It rarely goes beyond the Mechanical or Conceptual level. The more serious phases of Moral and Total doubt can be avoided if there is a willingness to deal with problems before they reach such a state.

The Brotherhood of Saint Gregory is a case in point. One might think that so young a community would not need renewal. But the Brotherhood understands that renewal must be ongoing; it is more an *attitude* than an *action*. Renewal is the ability to be open to change; the capacity to accept and face questions and challenges; and the willingness to drop or adapt a custom or tradition when the need for it is no longer present, or has been forgotten. It is also a principle of the community that the youngest members, even postulants and novices, have a voice, for it is their new eyes that may see problems the old hands have ignored or to which they have become accustomed.

This is not to say that the comments of a novice will always lead to change: often there is a good reason for a custom which may not be apparent to a newcomer. But the community encourages challenges and questions. Just as the Passover *Seder* ritual includes the question of the youngest present, “Why do we do this?” in order to evoke the retelling of the formative story of Judaism, so too the questions of novices and strangers can serve as means by which the community retells its story, and thereby comes better to understand it, and to be nourished by it. This perpetual and renewed enculturation allows each member fully to own the vision, myth, and ethos of the community.

In contrast, a member of a traditional community once said that the Brotherhood’s coming into existence and acceptance meant that people no longer assumed that a vow of chastity necessarily meant celibacy, and that he resented having to explain that his vow did include celibacy. Far from being resentful, he should have seen this as an opportunity to explore, and re-explore, a cardinal aspect of his faith journey.

Crisis / Resolution

The crisis, or turning-point, can come at any of the levels of doubt; and the sooner the better. A renewal-conscious organization will recognize the signs of breakdown and work to address them early. When an organization’s complacency level is so high that serious problems are ignored until late into the breakdown phase, a turn-around is more difficult, though not impossible.

The crisis can lead to three possible results: dissolution, low-grade continuity, or renewal and rebirth.

Dissolution

No one wants to talk about dissolution — that is the biggest problem with it. Experience shows that the vast majority of organizations cease to exist after a period of time. Death is as natural for organizations as it is for organisms.

The work of Elizabeth Kübler-Ross is helpful in understanding the stages of dealing with death. She outlines the classic responses to fatal diagnosis as:

- d Denial and isolation
- d Anger
- d Bargaining
- d Depression
- d Acceptance

In the Episcopal Church the identity of the physician and the accuracy of diagnosis is obscured. There is no authority which can say to a religious community, "You have been in decline for years, and you should at this point accept the fact, and begin to plan accordingly." In the absence of external authority, or even a formal body which could counsel and advise, it is up to the community to discern its own end.

Low-grade Continuity

It is possible for a once-great movement to be reduced to a core cell of "true believers" who keep the embers of a tradition alive long after the glory days are past. To take up a theme raised earlier, numbers are not necessarily a sign of organizational health. Large, popular movements usually have a low fidelity quotient at the individual level. When the stress and strain of internal or external pressures force the departure of a large number of members, some organizations are strengthened rather than weakened, and emerge better able to carry out their original goals.

Sometimes, though, such an organization is merely suffering a kind of communal paranoia, a joint messianic complex, in which its members see themselves as the "faithful remnant," boldly defending a cause no one else cares about. The church seems especially prone to such sectarian developments. When this sort of organization possesses significant financial reserves, it can maintain itself in a kind of ghost existence. Financial security allows the continued maintenance of the most external facilities. This should not properly be called life: it is more the artificial maintenance of a brain-dead or comatose body. Ultimate dissolution is merely indefinitely postponed.

Renewal

It is easier to maintain a continual renewal attitude than suddenly to try to renew after the long slow descent into breakdown and doubt. But it is possible for renewal to take hold of even the most complacent, cynical, or moribund organization.

Often a radical reform is called for. Sadly, oscillating decay followed by sometimes violent reform seems paradigmatic in the church, rather than the attitude of continued renewal. One would think that the church, believing itself to be filled with the Holy Spirit, would realize that the Spirit cannot be perfectly institutionalized in any external form, and be prepared always to take up the tabernacle and move on. But this is not the case.

It isn't only conservatives or traditionalists who fall into the trap of failing to renew. Even the adventuresome new Roman Catholic religious communities that came to America in the 19th century

largely failed to accompany their "frontier deeds" with critical reflection. They steadfastly held on to an ecclesiology, a spirituality, and sets of religious practices imported from Europe. Founders and their spirit were held in high regard, observances native and meaningful to another soil were scrupulously preserved, and even particular European nationalistic and cultural aspects of religious living were maintained, in forms of prayer, pious devotions, daily timetables, diet, and dress. American religious held on to these traditions while at the same time making externally major accommodations to a pluralistic and largely protestant society and government. (Fleming, Clifton 22)

For example, a large Roman Catholic Dominican community for women, which does much of its work in the inner cities, found that it was not attracting many African-American women as postulants. When they finally asked one of the departing postulants what her difficulty was, it turned out to be the food! The Dominican community in question had faithfully preserved the German menus of its dietary heritage. Similarly, in Chicago there are still two separate provinces of the Order of Friars Minor: one for men of Italian descent, one for those of Polish ancestry. How could either of these provinces hope to attract any African-American members? And what kind of a message are they sending about the church in which all are supposed to be One?

This appears to be a common problem for Roman Catholic religious communities. At a gathering of the National Assembly of Religious Brothers, one of the African-American members of the Brotherhood of Saint Gregory was present; his was the only black face in a room full of religious from all over the country. A Roman Franciscan approached one of the other Gregorians and asked, "What's it like having a black brother?"

Clearly, renewal is needed in the church. The great reforms of the Benedictine movement (which seemed to come in regular waves), the reforms of Franciscanism through the years, and the Protestant Reformation itself are examples of the striking turn-about that renewal can enable, and how much the church needs renewal from time to time.

The Anglican problem

How may one apply these principles to the religious life in the Episcopal Church? As noted at the outset, the state of the religious life in the Episcopal Church is clearly in disarray. Many of the religious orders are losing members through secularization, and the number of applicants is diminishing. Since the original *Special Report* of 1985, several religious orders and Christian communities (ironically, one of the orders most critical of the “new way” and one of the communities which received the most “assistance” from the Conference on the Religious Life) have ceased to exist, and a few others are on the verge of dissolution. In itself this should not come as a surprise: about three-fourths of all Episcopal religious communities founded eventually dissolved. It is also vital to note that being “new” is no guarantee of survival.

Special issues

Though a few communities have kept a certain amount of renewal spirit, many of the “old” Anglican communities are in the transition phase from complacency to doubt. This is an uncomfortable place to be, particularly if renewal is not an innate part of the community’s life. In addition to the problems inherent in this phase for any organization, some Anglican and Episcopal religious communities have special problems to deal with. These include:

- d The “catholic” question
- d Traditionalism
- d Obedience
- d Foundation problems: Romanticism and sponsorship
- d The “temptation to the desert”

The “catholic” question

As with much of what passes for “catholic,” many Anglican religious are still struggling with 19th-century notions of what religious life is all about. Br Terry Tastard, SSF, writes:

There are some special factors at work in the decline of Anglican religious orders . . . I would point to the ambiguous nature of our heritage from Rome. When religious communities were being established in the Church of England, they were naturally influenced by Roman Catholic traditions. Consequently many Anglican communities adopted a sevenfold office and swathed their members in all-encompassing, no-nonsense habits. They adopted

timetables that laid down what each person should be doing every minute of the day. Their overall approach made a radical distinction between “the religious life” and “the world.” The phrases themselves are significant: they imply that full religion somehow requires a life under vows, which in turn is cut off from the world.

Traditionalism

This relates to another besetting sin of Anglicans: *archæolatry* — worshipping at the shrine of tradition. Br Terry continues:

Anglicans need a less reverential attitude to customs which derive from a particular period in history. To undertake such changes Anglican communities often need to rediscover in contemporary terms the vision and challenge which called them into being. The reluctance of many Anglican communities to change is all the more surprising when it is recalled that, in the nineteenth century, religious sisters were in the forefront of emancipation. Looking back, it is difficult to recapture how bold those first Anglican sisters were. To help the poor they braved the rough street culture of fearsome slums and often lived in such areas themselves.

Obedience

Some Episcopal communities have an ironic heritage of quite willful disobedience at their roots. As seen above in the story of the departure of the Atonement communities, there was a significant tension between the authority of the church and the beliefs of the communities, which sometimes led to a superficial understanding of obedience, and the idolatry of conscience: We’ll do whatever the church says, as long as we agree with it.

Foundation problems

Some of the religious communities suffer from poor foundations: like some parishes built in the heyday of the Episcopal Golden Age, they were almost “vanity projects.” The founders (who had the vision but lacked resources) often were sponsored by well-meaning parish clergy or well-to-do dilettantes with romantic notions of the religious life. Such foundations could be made in part because no ecclesiastical permission was required to found a religious community in the Episcopal Church. To quote Br Terry again:

Many women’s communities still follow rules written by 19th-century parish priests. Being written by a man a long time ago is no automatic disqualification — Saint Benedict and Saint Francis both

left rules that bring life to their followers. But rediscovering the charisma of their founders led many Roman Catholic religious orders to rewrite their constitutions; we may at least ask how appropriate 19th-century rules and constitutions are for Anglicans.

Temptation to the desert

Another sponsorship dilemma often befell communities further into their development. This is the “temptation to the desert.” The process is insidious. The community (usually working in the inner city, with a ministry of teaching or outreach to the poor or unemployed) accepts a gift of property and builds a monastery intended primarily as a retirement or nursing facility for older members. A few younger members go along to care for the elders. With declining vocations, there are fewer young members to maintain the original urban or parochial works, and the community retreats to the monastic facility, taking up a work suited to it. Often hospitality becomes a ministry — and when the members of the community actually do the manual labor involved, this is as good a traditional monastic vocation as one could hope to find. But as the community ages, it becomes less able to carry out even these restricted ministries, and less attractive to young new vocationers. As one Roman Catholic sister tells, an applicant once left after a brief stay in her community, asking, “Who’s going to push *my* wheelchair?”

One need not look far to find examples of this retreat to the desert.

- d Two women’s orders originally devoted to inner city and parish work established large suburban convents, the upkeep of which is now very costly.
- d An order founded with the purpose of maintaining and staffing a nursing home first gave up nursing to become administrative, and then sold the nursing home in order to pursue “the monastic life.” The community has since dissolved.
- d A largely clerical order of parish clergy adopted the Benedictine Rule, although maintaining several houses, and allowing members to work in secular employment, which is a modern *conventual* (rather than *monastic*) model. A number of the monks have now returned to parish ministry.

General difficulties for Anglicans

In addition to these special problems, most Episcopal and Anglican communities share the following difficulties.

Lack of vocations

There is an undeniable lack of vocations, with many factors contributing to the problem. Religious life, particularly when still shrouded in medievalism, is not very attractive to modern sensibilities, unless the attraction is primarily æsthetic — in which case the soundness of the call may be questionable. The downplaying of the supposed “superior perfection” of religious life has probably had more of a negative effect in the Roman Catholic Church than in the Episcopal; but on the Anglican side one could credit the lack of vocations to the general suspicion of any sort of “extreme” devotional style.

Finally, the general emphasis on the dignity of the laity, with its own call and ministry, and the fact that one can have a quite full devotional life, and even forms of community, through such entities or programs as the Anglican Fellowship of Prayer, Cursillo, the Julian movement, and base communities, together with the renewal of parish life, has satisfied (or at least abated) the spiritual hunger which formerly found outlet in religious profession.

The ordination of women

The ordination of women has had an effect, in two ways. For women’s communities, the ordination of women, together with the general liberation of lay women to hold positions of active ministry apart from any external validation or certification, has diminished the pool of those who seek religious profession. This is, of course, a mistake: it confuses the *ministry* of religious with their *essence*. The Brotherhood’s experience has been that ordained persons come to it — or continue in it — precisely because of or in spite of the priestly or diaconal ministry they already possess. Ordination and religious life are two different, but mutually supporting, vocations.

Another effect of the ordination of women has been felt in both men’s and women’s communities. Several Episcopal men’s communities — including the Brotherhood — lost members over this controversial issue. And some women’s communities have found themselves torn by inner divisions when a member is ordained and not all of the other members approve of this (specifically or generally). For instance, a male priest celebrated the eucharist weekly for a house of sisters in New York. One day a young woman priest who was at the convent leading a retreat took offense at the fact that she was not asked to celebrate, and that a man had to be imported. One of the older sisters said to her, “My dear, I’ve been a member of this community for almost forty years, ordained for eight, and I’ve *never* been asked to celebrate

for my sisters.” In another women’s order it is understood that certain sisters will simply absent themselves from the Eucharist when an ordained sister celebrates.

The slippery, downward slope

The breakdown and decline of communities is itself a major vocational problem: a vicious cycle develops, since communities in breakdown do not inspire either vocations or the confidence of the church.

Celibacy as essential

The specific focus on celibacy as an *essential* quality of religious life as opposed to a *circumstantial* assistance in carrying out a specific form of religious life continues to be a problem in our culture, and elsewhere. The Society of Saint Francis found it was unable to attract African vocations in a new house on that continent, because being an unmarried man was considered to be a disgrace by the people in the region.

Clerical and episcopal ignorance

Priests and bishops generally do not understand the mechanics involved in the foundation and operation of religious communities, let alone the spiritual side of the religious life. Few clergy or bishops are familiar with the canonical requirements. (See the companion publication, “What Clergy and Bishops Should Know.”) Many clergy and bishops see the religious as primarily decorative, livening up the odd procession with a bit of medieval pageantry.

An old joke in clerical and religious circles says that to start a religious order in the Episcopal Church you need three people and a sewing machine. But in the late 80s the story of Joanna Clark, a California transsexual reported to have founded a religious order by making vows to her parish priest, reflected the sad fact that many Episcopal clergy and laity don’t understand the religious life, or the process by which such life is supported by the church. Joanna Clark made the headlines because her sex-change operation gave the papers a sensational angle; but there are dozens of “solitaries” — and new communities — in the Episcopal Church, who have made vows of some sort to parish clergy or to bishops, but who have no community link and receive little spiritual guidance: sheep without a shepherd. How does this happen?

When people sense a call from God, they normally turn first to their parish priest. A study by John H. Morgan (*Who Becomes Bishop*) reveals that few

Episcopal bishops (four percent) are associated with any religious community. That figure probably holds true for the clergy as well. Many Episcopalians don't even know religious communities *exist* in the Episcopal Church. The first source of information is — by default — the parish priest. After the Joanna Clark story broke, her rector said, "I really had not thought through the full implications of what I was doing." If that sort of cavalier attitude is common among those who are the primary source of vocational information, it is no wonder that few lay people know about religious life.

Sometimes ignorance is supported by real animosity. When one of our brothers confronted a person who insisted there were no religious communities in the Episcopal Church with the obvious fact of his existence, the response was, "Well you *shouldn't* exist!"

Such fine points as the difference between religious life and ordained ministry don't stand a chance when there are still large numbers of Episcopalians who don't even know that religious life exists, or who don't want it to! When it was suggested to a group of religious (mostly from the Conference on the Religious Life) that an aggressive communication campaign was needed, one of them responded, "We've done all that." That sort of despondent complacency is symptomatic of the illness afflicting religious life in the Episcopal Church. If the religious life is not just something to do while waiting for the grim reaper; if the religious life is something that fills one's very soul with excitement and makes life worth living; if the religious life means anything at all to the individual or to the church and the world, then religious dare not simply sit back and say, "We've done all that"!

Of course, public relations isn't primarily the job of the communities themselves: they have more important things to do, like feeding the hungry, caring for the sick, teaching, and doing the "work of God" — prayer. But clearly, education is a factor of major importance — comprehensive sources of information must be available which describe in detail the lifestyles of the various communities. Above all, parish clergy need to be better informed concerning the variety of religious life, and its significance. Certainly more is needed than occasional booklets, General Convention booths, and trite, romantic, video productions.

The Roman Catholic answer to renewal

Vatican II decreed,

The adaptation and renewal of the religious life includes both the constant return to the sources of all Christian life and to the original spirit of the institutes and their adaptation to the changed conditions of our time.... Since the ultimate norm of the religious life is the following of Christ set forth in the Gospels, let this be held by all institutes as the highest rule... Let their founders' spirit and special aims they set before them as well as their sound traditions — all of which make up the patrimony of each institute — be faithfully held in honor. All institutes should share in the life of the Church, adapting as their own and implementing in accordance with their own characteristics the Church's undertakings and aims in matters biblical, liturgical, dogmatic, pastoral, ecumenical, missionary and social. All institutes should promote among their members an adequate knowledge of the social conditions of the times they live in and of the needs of the Church... It should be constantly kept in mind... that even the best adjustments will be ineffectual unless they are animated by a renewal of spirit... (Perf.car. 2)

Reduced to their minimum, these are the three factors determined to be key to the future of the religious life:

- d the Gospel mandate,
- d the roots of the community spirit, or charism, and
- d adaptation to the needs of the modern world.

The Gospel mandate

It should come as no surprise to one familiar with church history that the church often leaves the gospel on the shelf, while pursuing other interests. Sadly, the religious often get just as caught up in this departure from the gospel as the rest of the church. We must never forget who was in charge of the Inquisition! Franciscans and Dominicans zealously persecuted each other in the interest of maintaining “the gospel truth.”

Hierarchy

Even today there are laws and rules in some communities which are in fact violations of the gospel spirit. Old models of hierarchy and domination persist where the gospel mandate of service and humility should thrive. The icon of eternal death, the pyramid, which has nothing at its heart but an embalmed dead body, comes to replace the icon of eternal life, the Cross with its body

that dies a suffering servant and rises again, the Savior of the world. Hierarchical and authoritarian structures need to be made more open, flexible, and capable of serving the needs of the community.

Rigidity

The desire to set things in stone, rather than let the Spirit move, often leads to calcified structures which are not only un-Christian, but fail to speak to today's needs. As Sr Joan Chittister notes, "Danger occurs when mission and ministry become confused. In that case people absolutize and petrify specific forms of service or witness and make particular works equivalent to the charisms which inspired them." (Chittister 37) Renewal means reform of obsolete regulations which do not reflect a true gospel spirit of justice, humility, and peace.

Celibacy in the light of the gospel

It is also time to examine from a gospel standpoint the validity of requiring celibacy as an essential norm for religious life, rather than as a distinctive mark of one subset of religious life. Surely there is more to the Christian ideal than "lack of genital contact" — which is the way some religious orders have come to define chastity. Such a levitical approach is unlikely to instill that true love which is the goal of religious and Christian life. Sr Clare Fitzgerald tells the story of an old nun. As she lay on her death-bed, she said, "Well, I know I've not always observed the vow of poverty very well; there were times I snuck a bit of extra dessert off the buffet . . . And I know I've had my ups and downs with obedience . . . But I've never broken my vow of chastity. *I have loved no one!*"

Such cases are not isolated. The restrictive notion of celibacy (when it is imposed as a condition upon those in whom it is not a charismatic gift) can lead to arrested emotional development.

The harsh fact is that many religious do not develop affectively and we have all seen the results. In the human sphere these men and women remain childish all their lives. After Vatican II many women religious became progressively more embarrassed and angry at their depiction in films and cartoons as over-sized little girls giggling their way through the tragedies of life, demurely submitting to "Father's" every whim, and considering themselves adequately compensated for the gift of their lives by being occasionally herded to the amusement park where they squealed in delight on the ferris wheel

and tangled their veils in the cotton candy. The religious women of the church today are recognized as leaders in the struggle for justice in church and society and they are rarely pictured as little girls. But there is no denying the real basis in people's experience of pre-conciliar religious for the perception of them as immature "innocents" ill-equipped to participate in an adult world.

Male religious have not really presented a more mature picture, although their membership in a male, dominant society which is more tolerant of affective immaturity in men often obscures their childishness. The "no-girls-allowed" ethos of male celibate groups is more typical of the activities and attitudes of sixth grade boys than of affectively well-developed men. The locker-room camaraderie, little-boy nicknames and horseplay, physical rigidity, projection of fear of the sexual onto women seen as universally seductive, and social awkwardness of many male celibates is a thin disguise for the insecurity of men who have never grown up affectively, who are out of touch with their own sexuality and scared to death of that of others. The occasional exposures in the press of clerical child-molestation, homosexual promiscuity, and less serious manifestations of arrested sexual development have made us aware of problems that were better hidden in earlier times but which are not new. (Schneiders 218f)

This is a far cry from the gospel! We are called to be human, which means to be made in God's image. The religious life should be assisting this development, and anything in religious life which works against this development is harmful, and should be reformed in the light of the gospel.

There are still some young religious, especially young men in religious communities and seminaries, who are being formed to a suspicion and fear of intimacy, to viewing all relationships in terms of power over or subservience to, to being always the "givers" of ministerial gifts incapable of even admitting need much less accepting help. The smooth plastic finish of such priests and religious is completely scratch-proof by the time they exit from formation. They seem to be composed of a material which gets neither hot nor cold, never gets dirty, can be endlessly battered without denting, but which is universally recognized as a cheap substitute for that rich natural substance that characterizes living beings. (Schneiders 226)

In reconsidering the question of celibacy, some Roman Catholic communities have discovered a new vitality and intimacy, rather than a deprivation, in the vow of chastity.

Religious as individuals and as communities are increasingly characterized by a more peaceful integration of sexuality, with a realistic sense of the need and possibility of intimate relationships compatible with the non-exclusive universal love expressed in the vow of chastity. (Fleming, Clifton 28)

Religious are dangerous: getting gospelized

When religious embrace the gospel they can become a force for renewal in the church and in the world. As Sr Clare Fitzgerald says, “Religious are dangerous, because they’re gospelized!”

The religious, at their best, witness to the Christian faith in a special way; they must above all be credible in their avowal of the evangelical counsels. Part of the gospel mandate is the prophetic witness to justice. But the religious way of witnessing to justice is not so much to see to it that justice is done (though certainly many religious are active in such campaigns, as Central America and the Philippines bear witness) but to *be just persons*. The witness is *personal*, not simply *programmatic*.

Whereas religious life was once viewed as a closed community of the vowed, it is now more readily seen as an intensified form of announcing God’s reign, through public witness. There is no rejection of the witness that in an earlier day was the hallmark of the religious life. But there is a new insistence that authentic witness must be *incarnational* (thereby avoiding excessive stress on the transcendental and the loss of contact with people and their real needs). (Fleming Kræmer 48)

John Lozano further describes this incarnational model, and how it relates to the gospel vision.

Religious are concerned about the extent to which their real life constitutes a witness, now that neither uniform habits nor characteristic buildings nor special timetables distinguish them from the rest of the citizenry . . . There is a sort of diffuse Franciscanism in our times, representing a desire to connect with the original and fundamental sense of the religious life: a life-style that is significant in itself . . . We have passed from a “decatalogue” code of observances to a “beatitudes” rule of life, from a minimum we must observe to a maximum toward which we must strive. Instead of observance we now tend to speak of growing fidelity. (Fleming, Lozano 147)

The Founding Charism

In many communities the intentions of the founders have not been kept. As noted above, most of the religious communities in the Episcopal Church were founded as apostolic organizations devoted to the “corporal works of mercy” or to teaching and preaching. Unfortunately, many of them gave in to the “temptation to the desert” described above. They tried to become *monastic* and not only now refer to themselves as such, but have given up their active ministries and retreated to monasteries. Since the call to the strictly monastic life is rare in this day, vocations need to be shared among a large number of communities which have to a large extent lost their distinctive “flavor.” Since there are few vocations, some of the Episcopal religious communities following the monastic model are in a particularly fragile state (considering the average age of their members).

Charism versus institution

Fidelity to a founding charism does not mean fidelity to the original institutional expression of that charism. It is easy to confuse a charism with the means by which it is expressed. As Pope Paul VI noted, “Certainly many exterior elements, recommended by founders of orders or religious congregations, are seen today to be outmoded.” (Renewal 5)

The Brotherhood of Saint Gregory, for example, was founded as a community for church organists, as a way to improve the devotional and spiritual life of a class of church folk who are often reduced to the level of being appliances. The community motto, *Soli Deo Gloria*, derives not from some sage monk, but from J. S. Bach, who signed his musical compositions with this dedicatory phrase. It is also the motto of the American Guild of Organists.

Similarly, the Brotherhood’s founder chose Saint Gregory as patron, not because he was a monastic called to active life, or a wise and pastoral counselor, or a “servant of the servants of God,” but because he is supposed to have been responsible for codification of the Gregorian chant. As the Brotherhood developed, however, it became clear that the original charism was not identical with its institutional expression: the true charism was in the two mottos: *Soli Deo Gloria*, and “servants of the servants of God.” And so the community evolved into an organization devoted to *service to the church*, all the while keeping true to its original charism. The two mottos reflect the twofold mission of the church: to restore unity between people and with God.

Similarly, Saint Francis took his original charge, “Rebuild my church,” in a literal sense: he set to work rebuilding ruined churches. Only later did he come to realize that he was not called to historic preservation and building maintenance, but to reformation of the church itself. The outward form of the charism changed, but the kernel, the spiritual gift, remained.

Religious communities need to distinguish between the charism and its institutionalization. Here is an instructive scenario from secular history:

Consider the railroad companies at the time of Kitty Hawk. Evidently their understanding of who they were could have been expressed: “We’re railroaders!” Hence, the curious tinkering of the Wright brothers and the event of Kitty Hawk were at best amusing. Imagine how differently they would have seen and responded to those events (and how much better off they would be now) had their understanding of themselves led them to the proposition: “We’re in the transportation business!” . . . Similarly, some religious orders that defined their mission as teaching or nursing are fast upon hard times as the traditional structures of catholic schools and hospitals falter in the financial crisis. But to have expressed the mission as “education” or “health care” admits of searching out varied methods to fulfill the call. [The community] must continually work at discerning and discovering points of contact of the order’s charism and the contemporary needs. (Cada 83)

True to the roots

It is important that adaptations not betray the most fundamental principles of the community’s ethos. For a traditional monastic community, in which contemplation or liturgical prayer is key, adaptations of these basic elements of the charism must be made — if at all — with great care. As Merton points out, there is a danger in thinking that “by throwing off the veil, running around talking to everyone, and getting themselves involved in every kind of active task” the monastic can find fulfillment. (Contemplation 152) Those called to the contemplative life must find their renewal inwardly. Those called to celibacy should rejoice in this charismatic gift. And those whose communities were founded for active ministry need to get back into action!

All of this is not to say that a community originally founded with missionary or apostolic purposes may not change, as its membership changes, into a monastic community. But such a change must be carried out with great conscious care, not simply as a byproduct of the pressure of circumstances. Above all, the true charism of monasticism must be present if the community

is to survive. It is not enough simply to adopt the externals of the monastic life; nor to adopt a conventual life style, and call it “monastic” or “Benedictine.” Monastics pray, live, and work together as a family, while conventuals may live together, but often work (and sometimes pray) away from “home.”

The signs of the times: the coming age

In 2010 religious communities will be characterized by inclusivity and intentionality. These communities may include persons of different ages, genders, cultures, races, and sexual orientation. They may include persons who are lay or cleric, married or single, as well as vowed and/or unwowed members. They will have a core group and persons with temporary and permanent commitments
(Report of the Roman Catholic Leadership Conference of Women Religious / Conference of Major Superiors of Men national meeting, August 19-23, 1989)

In looking at recent history, it appears a new age is beginning: this is the “Post–Modern Era.” As with each of the previous major turning points in church history, there has been a great upheaval in “the world” which has brought about new needs, and new opportunities. It is natural to assume that, just as new models of religious life have emerged at turning points in the past, so too the present era will call forth new dominant images for religious life.

Crises in institutions of religious life have come at a time when civil society is undergoing a crisis, which, in turn, affects the church on a deep level The third great epoch of the church’s history is beginning to open up The deep changes which this new epoch will bring, although they will be of great consequence to the church, can as yet hardly be glimpsed The religious life, which in its varied forms has always tried to respond to the needs of the church, will itself have to undergo a necessary crisis of readjustment We must emphasize that the term *crisis* does not have an exclusively negative denotation. In the past, crises in institutions of religious life have always been the crucible in which new forms and new families have taken shape. It will be sufficient to recall what happened in the sixth (the Master, Benedict), twelfth (Cistercians, Canons Regular), thirteenth (mendicants) and sixteenth centuries (apostolic institutes). (Fleming, Lozano 134f)

What is the “coming age” bringing with it? There will be more of a swing to individual, rather than communal ministry. This results in part from economic forces. It has become increasingly difficult, and in most cases

impossible, for a religious community to maintain and staff a hospital or school, or other large institution. Communities coming into existence now, like the Brotherhood of Saint Gregory, have chosen to emphasize individual ministries; not merely as an adaptation to meet current realities, but as an important element in the ethos of the community.

It has been noted above that at each of the turning points in the history of the church, new models and forms of religious life have emerged. The Brotherhood of Saint Gregory has emerged at this point in the history of the church. Many of the aspects of its ethos are not new: they go back to such figures as Gregory, Francis of Assisi, Francis de Sales, Jane de Chantal, and Nicholas Ferrar. But it appears that the change in the world has now made the coming into being of such new communities, and the adaptation and renewal of old communities, all the more important.

Older “communal” communities are rediscovering the value of allowing individual gifts to flourish, rather than cramming each member into the mold of “the good religious” of whatever community. Many communities who ten years ago said religious couldn’t work in “the world” now have members doing 9-to-5 jobs — not only to raise money for the community, but as new ways to adapt their ethos to the needs of a changing world.

Brother Terry Tastard notes,

In the past, the religious life — both Anglican and Roman Catholic — was frequently geared to the running of large institutions such as schools, hospitals or colleges. Even if there was no institutional work, religious tended to live in big groups. In such a life style there was only limited room for accommodating the individual! Over the past twenty years things have changed. Communities have shrunk in size, and there is less need for religious to run institutions. In the Roman Catholic Church the result has been a rich ferment as members of orders have been enabled to pursue new initiatives and to develop their skills and interests.

As these ministries, skills and interests are explored, however, it is important that the primary purpose and function of the religious life not be lost in the shuffle of life in this Post-Modern Era. It is important that the changes and adaptations reflect the primary call of Christian life: bringing people together, and bringing them to God. Being leaven in the loaf means sharing, not losing, one’s saltiness. “In our efforts to assure that the faith be *enculturated* — placed genuinely in the heart of our culture — we must always face the

danger that the faith may be *acculturated* — become simply a part of the American way of life.” (Fleming, Henriot, 112)

Clothing and language

Some of the adaptation to the current age is superficial. It is nonetheless important if the religious are to be credible rather than merely decorative. The shift from the medieval habit to more modern dress is an example of this sort of adaptation. While superficial, that does not mean it is easy, either for those who change or those who do not. Such adaptations need to be approached with charity. One of the distinctive marks of our era is a new respect for pluralism. This is not to say that the religious have given in to the “me” generation; it is simply to say that there is growing respect for the individual.

Pluralism has now reached a transitional phase in which it can give rise to considerable suffering. Those who are inclined toward a more traditional type of life, to a distinctive habit, or to a more devotional form of piety may suffer and feel lost among others who are leading a different type of life. Those who are inclined to a more personal life-style, with a more modern sensibility, often feel that they are the object of suspicion and insinuations. There are religious who worry too much about what others are saying or doing. And there are religious who speak and act without regard for the sufferings they may be causing others. After all, what good will our theology or our achievement of practical freedom do us if they are done without love? (Fleming, Lozano 139)

As with clothing, so with language. The Vatican II Decree on Renewal calls for the re-editing of “constitutions, directories, custom books, books of prayers and ceremonies and such like” and the suppression of “obsolete laws.” (Perf.car. 3) As far as office books go, the Episcopal Church already has one — the Book of Common Prayer, which is suitable for use by religious with little or no further need for revision.

Working in the world

Several communities have found that they are unable to maintain large houses built in their heyday — houses now closed or sold, while the members have moved to former guest accommodations. Other communities have tried to maintain their properties by putting their members to work in secular jobs. It is ironic that the very communities that in the mid-70s told the Brotherhood of Saint Gregory that it was not possible for religious to work in the secular society now have members employed in nine-to-five jobs. With the

endowments and legacies of the Episcopal Golden Age drying up, or the collapse of the institutions which once gave employment to the community members, there is not much choice if they are to maintain their properties.

The Brotherhood embraced working in the world and living “outside of local community” not as a byproduct of circumstance but as an intrinsic part of its charism. In this it is paradigmatic for the coming age of religious life, a coming age whose exigencies are being recognized widely in the Roman Catholic Church, and to a lesser extent in the Episcopal Church.

Religious . . . now have to seek out their own ministerial works, rather than receive them passively from the community. Recently a sister told me: “We ourselves have to create our own jobs and living conditions.” Obviously this kind of freedom has its price. A religious must now make a real effort to maintain communion with his or her own group. Today’s community tends to be seen in the light of unity in essentials, liberty in what does not affect common values of religious life or the charism and spirit of the institute, and a definite effort at establishing a communion of love Of course, many religious live in community, in the sense that they come home to sleep under the same roof, share meals together and treat each other with respect. But the number of religious who are living alone, when they could be living in community, is notable. (Fleming, Lozano 138f)

This new focus on individual gifts within a framework of a community of faith can be a model for the church. If the vision of this new age is refused — this vision which is in fact a gospel vision that can inspire people in the Philippines, in South Africa, and other places where religious are on the forefront for change in church and society — if this vision is refused, the religious life will die; and it will deserve to die — for it will have ceased to be a source of life.

What can be done for Anglicans?

This is a time of change. And for the Roman Catholic religious, change can be enforced when it does not come from the communities themselves. In the Anglican Communion, however, if the communities do not move, who will move them? There is so much to respond to both in the world and in the church. As Br Terry Tastard notes,

The exploration of individual gifts and interests can take place in a community context in which the needs of others and the commitments of the community are taken seriously. I sense that at

present, in many Anglican communities, an outmoded style of corporate life has been emphasized at the expense of the individual's creativity. This is a time of challenge for Anglican religious orders. Many of the social conditions which called our communities into being have reappeared.

But are the communities prepared to respond? What of the numerous small communities, those with fewer than six members? The Vatican II reform expressed the belief that those communities which are judged "not to possess reasonable hope for further development . . . should be forbidden to receive novices in the future. If it is possible, these should be combined with other more flourishing communities and monasteries whose scope and spirit is similar." (Perf.car. 21) In the Episcopal Church the leaders of the communities themselves must make these decisions. It takes humility for a community to admit that it is not thriving, to dissolve and seek to join another with the same spirit.

Along these same lines, bishops and others in the position to do so should discourage the foundation of new communities with spirits essentially similar to those already in existence. "Otherwise communities may be needlessly brought into being which are useless or which lack sufficient resources." (Perf.car. 19)

The same care must be taken with those who wish to become "solitary" religious. It is dangerous for individuals to seek to live the religious life alone and virtually unsupervised. This way is fraught with grave spiritual danger for the individual and those in authority. Unless adequate supervision can be maintained by the bishop personally or a spiritual guide of great experience, such persons should be encouraged to enter an established community.

The reading of the Vatican II document *Perfectæ Caritatis* (only 20 pages!) is heartily recommended to Anglicans. Only the high points have been touched on here, and there is much to be gained from a careful study of this document, and to be learned from the Roman Catholic brothers and sisters who have been involved in this program of renewal.

Finally, it is important that the clergy and bishops be in possession of some basic facts concerning the religious life in the Episcopal Church. The leaflet, "What Clergy and Bishops Should Know," also available from the Brotherhood, is a helpful place to begin.

Hopeful Signs

In the midst of all this change, there are bright spots. Several communities have continued to thrive — in general they are the ones who have remained true to their foundations and the gospel. Some apostolic communities who had fallen prey to the “temptation to the desert” are now awake to the dangers and have begun to reverse course. It might be as well for all religious communities to divest themselves of extensive properties, by placing them in trust with the church, in a spirit of devotion and faith.

The wounds of Christ

And still our wrongs may weave thee now
New thorns to pierce that steady brow,
And robe of sorrow round thee.

(Walter Russel Bowie, Hymn 598)

The Risen Christ showed his wounded hands and side to the doubting disciples. One might say that it was their doubt that kept those wounds from healing, that kept that blood flowing. The Body of Christ, the church, is no less wounded by doubts and divisions. The pride that causes division and dismay, the clinging to distinctions of human making, to customs of earthly origin: these are the nails and thorns that wound that already bleeding body. May we, and all Christians, embrace the only vocation which God wants us to undertake — to become children of God, loving one another as we have been loved. For where true love and charity are found, there is God.

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