Introduction

I have learned two important lessons about the nature of religious life which have led to (if I may speak personally) its re-founding in my own mind and imagination. The first is that religious life, as a particular expression or pattern of Christian existence, originates “from below.” By this I mean that religious life emerged from experiment and practice; it did not pre-exist in some ideal state, waiting to be discovered by Christian visionaries. Religious life, with its characteristic stresses upon poverty, chastity, and obedience, did not descend from on high but arose from within the human world. The fact that religious life has analogues within the major religious traditions of the world underscores further its anthropological basis. Christian religious life traditionally based itself on a particular reading of the gospels—a somewhat circular reading—which drew attention to Jesus as the exemplar of the three vows. But the way Jesus himself lived—and this lies at the heart of what I learned—was not scripted in advance, as if Jesus had been destined to be the archetypal religious. Jesus’ life assumed the form or pattern we perceive in the gospels because he walked with his people. His life reflects what had been so obvious from the Hebrew Bible, even though it took us a long time to frame the point correctly, namely, that God loves the poor preferentially and accompanies them throughout history. The vows are what happens (if I may put things this way) when people choose to live prophetically and walk with the poor. In other words, it is the story of Jesus that gives meaning to the vows, not the other way round. Apart from his life, death, and resurrection, poverty, chastity, and obedience are empty forms.

Religious life, therefore, at least in its ideal form, ought to be a living embodiment of human solidarity, the solidarity so
deeply impressed upon Christian imaginations by the Incarnation itself. This second and complementary idea is simple, although coming to see it took me many years. Our aspirations for a world totally remade—the new heavens and the new earth of the visionary who gave us Revelation—should be manifest in the way religious communities function from day to day. Commitment to this ideal will be obvious in a community’s holiness and work, if the Eucharist is the liturgical expression of Christian solidarity and if communities regularly center their religious lives in this mystery. Solidarity is what assures the quality and depth of a religious community’s prayer, its evangelical witness, and its apostolic projects. And solidarity demands a real connectedness to the pressing concerns of the whole human family.

For people outside of religious life, religious communities have frequently proven to be welcome, liberating, even indispensable sources of spiritual guidance and encouragement. The spiritualities or approaches to the interior life underlying religious communities and devoutly practiced by the men and women who have joined them have been sifted and tested over centuries. Each community, it might fairly be said, develops its own particular insight into the life of prayer and Christian practice. From the experience of those communities as well as from the writings and example of individual religious all of us in the Church have learned valuable lessons about how we are put together, about the human condition, about different ways of approaching the mystery of God, about discernment and living the Gospel, and about mysticism and contemplation.

For all these reasons, religious life has been a priceless gift to the Church. Without underestimating the enormous social and educational contributions religious have made over
centuries to their societies and to human civilization itself, the fact is that religious have been above all reservoirs of wisdom and exemplars of holiness for countless “ordinary” men and women eager to develop their interior lives. I hardly mean to discount the honest spiritual depth of those who spend their lives outside religious communities, since married life and the single state can certainly claim the lion’s share of Christian saints—even if they have not been canonized. I mean simply that, in my view, religious life exists for the good of the Church and not for the personal spiritual wellbeing of individual religious. People depend upon us, not because we are morally better or more fully graced, but because we are fellow travelers who have learned a thing or two about the routes to union with God. The expectation created by the rich legacy of wisdom and holiness could well lead to the reinvention of religious life in our new millennium. As it continues along its way through history, the Church is going to need both pioneers in the ways of the Spirit and the sure footing of trustworthy experience, the wisdom of its ascetics and saints. After all, the fact that we have learned so much about the interior life does not mean that the Spirit has nothing left to teach us.

One thing which has left an indelible imprint on religious life and which has been gradually transforming the face of Christian spirituality in our time is the realization that God and the people of God are inseparable. Their histories are locked together forever; we simply cannot talk about one without the other. Just as the body of Christ and the blood of Christ are sacramentally inseparable, God and the people of God are linked in an abiding sacramentality: the brother or sister we do see, and the creator God whom we do not.
The far-reaching implications of this realization will be unfolding for some time. I do not mean that God and the people of God are not conceptually distinct, or that belief in divine transcendence is no longer timely. But in daily practice and in the everyday dynamics of Christian prayer God does not become present to us without the people. The Christian may pray in solitary places, but the Christian never prays alone. A dedication or consecration of one’s life to the things of God would be meaningless, as far as the Gospel is concerned, if one overlooked that chief among the concerns of God is the liberation and sanctification of God’s people.

Being married to God would be relatively smooth going, if God were to move into our lives alone, unaccompanied. But marriage to God further translates into marrying God’s people. No wonder Simeon foresaw a sword of sorrow when Mary presented the infant Jesus at the temple. She was soon to learn that the son so concerned about his Father’s business would be engaged in a lot more than dusting the furnishings of a sacred building or mastering sacred texts. The temple stood for the people as much as it stood for God, and in the end the stones of the old temple would have to come down as Jesus constructed a new temple—a new people—around himself. Yet whoever marries the people also marries their crosses; Simeon must have known that. Numerous religious have grasped this truth with a depth and seriousness that turned them into prophets, even into martyrs.

There is a mystery here with deep roots in our ascetical traditions and in the biblical narratives themselves, but that mystery has been particularly refocused for us by the recurring use of the word solidarity, a term which may have become part of our ordinary spiritual coinage because John Paul II has used
it so often. Joined to this usage is a phrase that expresses richly and suggestively another dimension of God’s oneness with the people of God, namely, the preferential option for the poor. The term solidarity and the expression preferential option for the poor are complementary. Indeed, any talk of solidarity that does not include the option for the poor is destined to slide into political and social romanticism. Where Teilhard de Chardin spoke some years ago of the evolution of a planetary consciousness, we today should point to the globalization of the human spirit as one of the chief signs of our times. Neither the Omega point nor the “divine milieu” would be comprehensible for people today without lived solidarity and the precision of thinking that follows from making a preferential option for the poor.  

1 Elizabeth Johnson captured the idea very well:

Solidarity is a type of communion in which deep connection with others is forged in such a way that their sufferings and joys become part of one’s own personal concern and a spur to transformative action. It entails a movement out of a selfish seclusion and into relationship where people bear one another up in mutual giving and receiving.  

2 The practice of solidarity both on the part of individuals and of communities has the power to remake us totally; ultimately it will be what truly saves us, the poor and the non-poor alike. Thus Johnson goes on to say:

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In situations of tremendous injustice, solidarity among the victims themselves is expressed in initiatives mutually taken to resist, to hope, and to celebrate even in the midst of suffering. For those not directly affected by the particular victimization, solidarity is expressed in conversion toward those who suffer, not just being affected emotionally by their pain but choosing to love by taking it as one’s own, joining the struggle for life for all. *When engaged in as a practice of faith, solidarity ushers both groups, those whose life is being destroyed but who are resisting and those who accompany them, asymptotically toward the mystery of God. 3*

When the spirituality upon which religious build their lives is sound, the whole body of the Church will be healthy and full of light. But following Jesus’ parable through to its sober finish, when the eye fills up with blindness the entire body becomes dark. The intense efforts on the part of religious institutes to renew themselves during the post-conciliar period underline the important role their spiritualities continue to play in the life of the Church. Communities were obviously complying with the instructions of Vatican II when they returned to their spiritual roots, charter documents and founding charisms for guidance in responding to the challenges created by the modern world. Perhaps the Council perceived even greater urgency in the matter of renewing religious life because of the ripple effect this would undoubtedly have on the rest of the church.

In many cases religious communities verified, from their strenuous efforts at renewing themselves, the truth of another gospel text that says that new wine demands new wineskins. The process of renewal, they saw, could be checkmated when

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3 Ibid., 176. Italics added.
individual religious, either through rigidity or fear, lost their imagination. Yet they also witnessed the great apostolic and spiritual energies which were suddenly released as numerous others began interpreting and responding to the signs of the times.

According to the Council, “religious life is intended above all else to lead those who embrace it to an imitation of Christ and to union with God through the profession of the evangelical counsels.”¹⁴ But profession of the counsels should eventually lead a religious into a radical oneness with the world. The vows orient a person toward something essentially positive: not to a denial of or turning away from the world but toward a deep interior union with all men and women, and particularly with men and women in distress, the gospel’s poor.⁵ At the risk of sounding presumptuous, I think we could rephrase the conciliar teaching to say: “Religious life is intended above all to lead those who embrace it to union with the people of God and thereby to encounter and immerse themselves in the mystery of Christ.”⁶

¹⁴ Decree on the Appropriate Renewal of Religious Life, #2(e).


The form of the passion which is appropriate to religious life (for every Christian life participates in some way in the passion of the Lord) is the suffering born of solidarity, a solidarity which is total, lifelong and paradoxically joyous. I say paradoxical because there is a peculiar, evangelical blessedness whenever one finds oneself living and standing alongside Jesus in his suffering. Paul would confide to the Corinthians: “Therefore, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Cor 12:10). “Blessed are you,” Jesus instructed his followers, “when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account” (Matt 5:11). A mysterious blessing indeed! I don’t know whether solidarity is the wine or the wineskin, but if solidarity is the wineskin, then at least for today the option for the poor is that new wine of which Jesus spoke.

Religious life, then, is uniquely poised to explore, explain and embody solidarity. This it can do in its liturgical practice; its forms of personal prayer; its networking with other groups throughout the world formally committed to the God-quest; its insertion into the local church, and into civic communities and neighborhoods; its awareness of the wide possibilities surrounding human life over against the narrow vision and parochialism which blunt the prophetic force of the gospel’s message; and in its ability to contextualize the individual’s suffering and sinfulness in terms of the corporate sufferings of ethnic groups, marginalized peoples and entire nations.

In a popular article entitled “Religion Makes a Comeback. (Belief to Follow)” Jack Miles, the writer who gave us God: A
Biography, drew attention to the remarkable resurgence of interest in religion in the United States today, a resurgence accompanied by a high lack of concern for traditional beliefs. America has long been known for its avid cultivation of individualism. In the matter of religion, this boils down to what Miles referred to as “an institutionalized anti-institutionalism.” He wrote:

Americans are particularly at ease with forms of religious expression that require little in the way of organizational commitment and impose little in the way of group identity. Religious books, television shows and one-time events like marches and revivals all meet those criteria. Less in the individualist American grain is church or synagogue or mosque membership, which does indeed impose a group identity and which, even more important, demands regular attendance, steady financial support and religious education of the young. In general, classic organized religion functions more as a corrective to American individualism than as an expression of it; for that very reason it is both prized and resisted.

Miles put his finger on something deeply troubling. Catholics, it would appear, have become infected with the same individualist spirit or attitude that has marked the rest of Americans. Individualism is a national trait sharply at odds with the spirit of the gospel, yet it runs through us at so deep a level that we may not even be conscious of how much it infringes on our claim to be a church which is one and catholic. Furthermore, Catholic culture in the United States appears

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incapable of protecting the Church against such individualist tendencies. In his preface to American Catholic Charles Morris noted:

American Catholicism is the country’s largest religious denomination. But it has always been as much a culture as a religion, one defined by its prickly apartness from the broader, secular American culture—in America, usually enthusiastically for America, but never quite of America. In its glory days, especially in the 1940s and 1950s, the Catholic Church constructed a virtual state-within-a state so Catholics could live almost their entire lives within a thick cocoon of Catholic institutions.

The story of American Catholicism is therefore the story of the rise and triumph of a culture, and of the religious crisis that ensued in the wake of that culture’s breakdown.9

If we agree with what these writers (and others) have reported to us, then a major challenge facing the Church in our time has to be one of creating and promoting a new matrix for nurturing the life of faith, a culture of solidarity. After all, if it is not to degenerate into a set of lifeless concepts and disembodied beliefs, faith requires a sustained exposure to the prayer and practice of everyday church life. Unless it is planted in an environment of everyday belief and practice, faith will never take root and flower. Apart from a culture of solidarity, the gospel story is not going to seize our imaginations the way God intended that it should.

The breakdown of which Morris wrote cannot be reversed by retreating into a suburban ghetto or by retrieving past

markers of Catholic identity. We need something fresh, or in the words of Robert Schreiter, a “new catholicity.”10 We need a Catholicism that is fully conscious of itself as a world religion. Responding to the challenge of our times is going to force us to become in a healthy sense counter-cultural. We shall have to learn to define and distinguish ourselves over against the American mainstream and to offer our society a gospel corrective to lopsided spiritualities more concerned about making people feel good about themselves than about lifting burdens off human shoulders. Once again, the Church will be looking to religious men and women for instruction and example as it sets about replacing a culture of individualism with one of solidarity. The price for failing to meet this challenge of creating a culture of solidarity will be spiritual isolationism and the eclipse of God, a tragic way to start the new millennium.

I do not mean to suggest that religious need to cast themselves as social reformers, although genuine social reform is really and truly God’s work and certainly fitting for religious to engage in. “Blessed are the peacemakers,” Jesus told us, “for they will be called children of God” (Matt 5:9). Yet like Jesus performing his symbolic cleansing of the temple—a small-scale prophetic action which evoked the memory of past prophets, announced God’s future judgment and prefigured the establishment of a new, living temple—religious communities can help the rest of the Church to understand why talking to God is both more interesting and more gratifying if one knows how to carry on a conversation with the world.

Personal relatedness to God is enriched and deepened when one integrates the preferential option for the poor with his or her politics, worship, religious observance, interpersonal relationships and economic choices. To opt for the poor is to take as the coordinates of one’s inner space the movements of communities in exile, the people of God waiting for deliverance from their Egyptians and Babylons. The solitary praying of individual Christians as well as the communal praying of our liturgical assemblies stand to discover enormous spiritual energy the more they unite themselves with those movements and hopes.

In his penetrating study *Violence Unveiled* Gil Bailie wrote: “By claiming the victim as Lord, the Gospels slowly begin to awaken an empathy for victims everywhere.” And that is exactly the dynamic behind solidarity as the contemporary form of Christian holiness. When Christians declare that God’s Word has become flesh, and especially the flesh of a victim, they are in effect announcing that whatever is done to human beings anywhere is also done to God.

Of course, the rule about solidarity applied above all to Jesus. At the beginning of his ministry, at the wedding feast in Cana, Jesus had symbolically married his people, offering them the new wine of the messianic time. His identity had been formed in terms of the experience and fortune of the men and women of Israel, in whose lives he had encountered God.

Jesus’ solidarity with men and women becomes strikingly evident in his standing with them for baptism, in his praying with them in the synagogues of Galilee, in the crowds which

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would not let go of him, in his realignment of family loyalties, in his being compared with Moses as people-founder and nation-builder, through the option for the poor which marked his preaching and miracles, and at the cross, where Jesus hung alongside the victims of every time and place. Perhaps Matthew’s gospel gives us the most beautiful insight into Jesus’ solidarity with his people when the evangelist quotes Isaiah 53 in connection with Jesus’ healings and exorcisms: “He took our infirmities and bore our diseases.” To walk with the people of God is to accompany them in their suffering and desperation, to shoulder their burdens and to share their oppression. The Central American theologian Jon Sobrino has even spoken of a “God of solidarity.” He explains:

The phrase “crucified God” is therefore no more than another term, provocative and shocking, with the same meaning as “God of solidarity.” . . . [I]n history there is no such thing as love without solidarity and there is no solidarity without incarnation. Solidarity that was not prepared to share the lot of those with whom it wanted to show solidarity would be paternalism, to put in mildly, or would lead to despotism. Solidarity in a world of victims that was not prepared to become a victim would in the end not be solidarity.12

In the conclusion to her informative book on the history of religious women, Jo Ann Kay McNamara wrote:

The premise of the contemplative life has always been that self-mortification informed by love of God and God’s creatures can generate transferable grace. No other modern profession can supply this service. . . . Monasticism on the

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model of the first millennium church might prove again to be the ideal force around which Christian communities could be formed and nurtured.\textsuperscript{13}

While I readily agree with her point about the potential contribution that monastic forms of religious life could make to the Church of the future, the idea that monks discover a wisdom to be shared with the rest of us needs to be set alongside another point. Apostolic religious life can teach the rest of the Church what it means to find God in the midst of the world, which is not quite the same thing as serving God in the midst of the world. Learning to experience God right in the world also constitutes a great lesson, a special wisdom and a “transferable grace.”

Most of the material in the following pages first appeared as articles; their explicit concern has been the spirituality underlying religious life. But as I explained, when it is truly a symbolic enactment of the gospel story about Jesus, religious life reveals a relevance that goes far beyond the walls of religious houses. Sidney Callahan once said: “I view vowed religious vocations as a condensed, crystallized, intensely focused, institutionalized, corporate embodiment of every Christian’s call to love God and one’s neighbor wholeheartedly.”\textsuperscript{14}

Religious certainly have not cornered the spirituality market. Their experience of God and whatever insight they have

\textsuperscript{13} Sisters in Arms: Catholic Nuns through Two Millennia (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 637.

gleaned into the gospel are not the Church’s only fountains of holiness and wellsprings of wisdom. Yet the fact is, as Thomas Merton eloquently reminded us, no one who takes the interior life seriously can escape a lifelong engagement with the human condition. The monk, he had painstakingly learned, understands a lot more about the world than the world understands about monastic existence. In the end, perhaps, religious vows, marriage vows and baptismal promises are not nearly so unrelated as one might think. They share the same theological center. Hence it is my hope that the pieces assembled here will be of interest to Christian readers outside of religious life as well as within it.

I am grateful to Fathers Rodolfo D’Agostino R.C.J., John Bruno, R.C.J., and Antonio Fiorenza, R.C.J., the editors of the magazine *Vocations and Prayer* over the past twenty-five years for permission to use material that I have published in the magazine. One of the ideas developed in those chapters is that religious life is the place where the Church experiments with prayer. I was tempted to write that religious life is the place where men and women experiment with God, except that way of putting things sounds awfully irreverent. It would be far truer to our experience to say that in religious life God experiments with us, testing and assaying us. In religious life God stretches our minds and our theology to embrace more fully Christ’s revealing word. God does this, moreover, not just for the sake of religious themselves but for the sake of the whole people of God. It is God who has lighted us; we are his lamps. The light that is in us shines for the sake of all who dwell in the household of the Church.

The opening chapter “Looking for the Sign of Jonah: God’s Revealing Light Today” first appeared in the January
1998 issue of The Way. The article “It is Good for Me to Be Here” came out in Praying Magazine in its issue for January-February 1997 (that article has become chapter 4 in these pages). Chapter 10 “The Vows ‘from below’” first appeared in the Review of Ignatian Spirituality in 2002. And chapter 13 “Reformulating the Religious Vows” was published in the July/August 1995 issue of Review for Religious. Chapters 5 and 9 are previously unpublished. A number of the chapters are commentaries or reflections on the annual messages from Popes John Paul II, Benedict XVI and Francis for the World Day of Prayer for Vocations in the spring. The messages themselves can be found on the Vatican website.

For any reader who may be familiar with the original pieces, I trust that the revisions I have made will be seen as improvements. Biblical quotations throughout are usually taken from the New Revised Standard Version, although sometimes I draw on the English Standard Version. Perhaps I should apologize for the fact that I have not been able to come up with a comfortable, unobtrusive way to avoid the use of the personal pronoun in reference to God. I am aware of the theological and spiritual sensibilities many Christians today have in this regard, but the Christian biblical tradition employs personal pronouns in reference to God (or at least in reference to God as a literary character). Avoiding the pronouns consistently and on principle makes one’s writing sound unscriptural and one’s thinking aseptic. I do not want to leave the reader with that impression.

Finally, my own sense of what religious life is and can be has been influenced by the fact that for the past forty years I have been a member of the Society of Jesus. The Ignatian vision of what religious life was supposed to be for the young Society was not uniformly welcomed by others in the church of the
sixteenth century. Even today, not all subscribe to that vision. Today one hears in some quarters that the “liberal” model of religious life, with its insistence upon linking faith with justice, has bottomed out. I hope and pray that this is untrue, especially since the Society so deeply incorporated that insistence into its own renewal. Whatever else one says, however, Ignatius had made the story of Jesus the absolutely first principle of his own life, and he was skilled in drawing others into the utter reality of that story. No matter what happens in the future of religious life, the one non-negotiable must always be the story of Jesus. And that story will only be told effectively by those who know him.