9.
Sacraments and Solidarity

Although the Church decided long ago not to include the consecrated life on its list of official sacraments, the fact is that religious life has conferred a kind of sacramentality upon the lives of religious men and women just as surely as marriage has done for the majority of Christians. The sacramentality that marks the lives of most of our families, our friends and the families we meet in our ministries and apostolic work is the mystery of Christ’s union with his people, the covenant faithfulness of God, and the friendship which brings about an intimate union of minds and hearts. But in what respect is religious life sacramental?

Sacraments, of course, are signs. Indeed, each sacrament embodies not just one but a number of signs. Baptism, for instance, points to the new and redeemed human community called church. It points to the new and redeemed human being grounded in the mystery of Jesus’ dying and rising. Baptism points further to God’s ongoing creative power in human life, to cleansing from sin and to the beginning of eternal life right here in this world.

Religious life too is a sign. It points to the deep, pervasive desire for God that has characterized countless lives in every time and place. As that desire becomes conscious and is allowed to direct the mind and heart, it leads a person to pray. Religious life turns the process of inner transformation, from natural orientation to conscious desire and to formal prayer, into a sacrament. Indeed, religious life might even be described as the sacrament of human desiring.
Obviously, I am not suggesting that only religious should be thought of as men and women of prayer; that would be downright nonsense. Nevertheless, religious life is a public sign within the Church that points to humanity’s native potential for union with God. Religious life is a constant reminder to the Church that prayer is not an appendage to each day but a whole way of life, and that contemplative union with God is our common destiny. While it would be equally ridiculous to claim that religious men and women more than others in the Church signify in their lives the importance of service, humility, forgiveness and compassion, the fact is that religious life in its outward form and mission gives vivid expression to these gospel values too. As we have already seen, the soul of a Christian is not truly whole until it has acknowledged and integrated its active and contemplative sides.

It may be significant that in the Summa Theologica Saint Thomas treated religious life after his discussion of prophecy, ecstasy, the gift of tongues, inspired speech and the grace to work miracles. Thus it would appear that for him religious life should most logically be classified with the charismatic gifts. At the risk of overstating the obvious, it is worth repeating that religious life, like every other charism, does not exist for its own sake but for the sake of the whole people of God. And as a charism religious life rests upon the power of the Spirit for its existence and ongoing effectiveness. The same holds true, of course, for each of the Church’s sacraments. Without the Spirit empowering us to believe, sacramental celebrations would have no redemptive value.

Many of us had been so accustomed to thinking that sacraments are something we receive for our personal spiritual benefit that it was easy to overlook the daily challenge they
place upon us. Sacraments have to be enacted or put into practice not just liturgically, but in the details of everyday life. What merit would there be in partaking in the Eucharistic bread if we are not prepared to be broken and shared ourselves? What point would there be in seeking reconciliation with the Church if we are not prepared to extend the same forgiveness to those who have offended us? The lasting fruitfulness of the Church’s sacramental life is revealed and verified in the sacramentality of Christian existence, the enduring sign of the Lord’s presence on earth. In its own particular sacramentality religious life reveals one of the modes of the risen Christ’s real presence to his Church.

These observations may strike the reader as pretty formal and theological, and they are. My first point is simply that sacraments have to signify something, and that what they signify ought to be apparent. What they signify should also be beautiful so as to attract others to the beauty of their source. My second point is that religious life is attractive insofar as it draws attention to what all of us, vowed religious or not, intuitively recognize what our lives are about. Our lives are about prayer, they are about desire, and they are about God. But the praying, desiring and encounter with God do not unfold independently of other human beings, especially human beings who are oppressed and poor. Religious life, therefore, not only gives visible, public expression to the human thirst for God; it is preeminently a sacrament of human solidarity. Now, what does this mean?

**A sign of realized solidarity**

First of all this means that every sacrament presupposes our rootedness in the human condition and our belonging to a concrete community of faith. The first Adam exists inside every
one of us; we recognize immediately the preposterous nature of the Pharisee’s prayer, “God, I thank you that I am not like other people” (Luke 18:11). Yet within the circle of the human community there is a clearing, a place where we can see and celebrate a way out of the human predicament. Sacraments thus express the way we live and grow as church.

Each sacrament has the potential to draw us more intimately, concretely and irreversibly into the life of the people of God. We may need to do further revision of our rituals to bring this potential into focus. Be that as it may, the life of the people of God is not only a spiritual or interior life; it is also a political, social and economic life. The believer’s inner landscape eventually becomes the world itself. Vatican II suggested as much in the celebrated opening sentence of The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World: “The joy and the hope, the grief and the anxiety of the men and women of the present time, especially those human beings who are poor or in any way afflicted, these too are the joy and the hope, the grief and the anxiety of the disciples of Christ.” The Church realizes, the Council went on to say, that it is “truly and intimately joined with the human race and its history.”

The Council called upon us to make our own the historical experience of other men and women, particularly the experience of communities of suffering. Doing this, however, has important consequences not only for our practice, but also for our interior life and the way we pray. For by joining ourselves truly and intimately to the human race we begin to experience in ourselves the sin of the world, the hunger of the world for bread and for reconciliation, the infirmities human beings have to bear, and the world’s longing for faithfulness and truly adult
love. In short, the Council was teaching us that to be a follower of Christ means living in solidarity with the world.

Living in solidarity is a lesson that requires patient instruction and constant exemplification. I think that living in solidarity also neatly defines an essential aspect of religious life. The sacramentality of religious life necessitates that this aspect be signified, that is, realized solidarity needs to be a clear, unambiguous and attractive sign.

**An emerging form of Christian spirituality**

In describing a spirituality that is genuinely Christian, the Orthodox theologian Dumitru Staniloae of Romania wrote:

True spirituality implies communion and true communion implies spirituality. True communion cannot be fostered or achieved by external measures of discipline or worldly interest. True spirituality is not individualist in character nor is it realized by taking refuge in the self, and that is certainly not true spirituality which is found wanting in love for the rest of men. Spirituality does not mean the accumulation of the experiences of a refined spirit, an undisturbed enjoyment of certain insights which can be cherished without reference to the community. True spirituality grows with the experience of the communion of many persons, with the understanding of the many complex situations born in the life of communion. It is fed from the richness of the nature of concrete realities and from the limitless variety of relationships with more and more persons, and it shows its power by overcoming contradictions and by establishing a harmony among these relations. True spirituality is seen in the efforts of all men to achieve a common unity, but a unity which respects the specific contribution which each individual can bring to this
growth of understanding and to the content of mankind’s common experience and values.¹

There is considerable resonance between this Orthodox description of true spirituality and the ideas we have been developing throughout these pages. Spirituality cannot be individualist, it is by nature relational, and it envisions the unity of the human race as the goal of Christian prayer and practice. Although I have urged that solidarity is a sharper and more arresting word than communion, the fact remains that a healthy spirituality cannot be God-centered without being world-centered. In addressing a meeting of Jesuits engaged in the social apostolate, Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, the twenty-ninth Superior General of the Society of Jesus, expressed the same idea in different words:

Our mission for justice, culture and dialogue impels us to be near people and with them in daily life, like the first Jesuits to take once again to the streets of our cities, in order to read there in the very heart of people’s existence the signs of the times, the signs of the Spirit’s action. If God loves the world, our mission among people should reveal to them that, in all aspects of their existence, they are already grappling with God, whether they know it or not. For this reason the Ignatian call to mission is a call to be involved in the world, not to break with it; a call to become wide open

¹ See his chapter “The Problems and Perspectives of Orthodox Theology” in Dumitru Staniloae, Theology and the Church, trans. Robert Barringer (New York: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1997), 217-218. I am indebted to Tom Neal of the Diocese of Pensacola for bringing this work to my attention.

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to humanity where God is at work in all things, laboring for the salvation of all.²

The spirituality of solidarity is still in its formative stages both within religious communities and elsewhere in the Church. The steps or stages that usually mark a person’s ascent to union with the people of God have not yet achieved the distinctiveness of the traditional stages within the ascent to perfection. The forms of ascetical practice that must accompany the ascent are becoming clearer, along with criteria of discernment. Those engaged in giving spiritual direction are becoming more sensitive to the social context in which people’s lives unfold as well as the social context of the directors themselves. And the Church has yet to integrate the enormous labor and wonderful results of Catholic biblical studies into its catechesis, especially in the way the Church hands on the story of Jesus. Families are joined together much more closely because of the stories they share than the blood in their veins, and the same holds true for the Church. The narrative about Jesus provides the foundation of our being Christian; believing communities without individuals skilled in telling the Jesus story will be anemic at best. But before that story can be told in a new key it as to be lived in a new key, and that calls for laboratories of the Spirit.

How the classical ways of purgation, illumination and union are going to translate in a spirituality of solidarity, as I said, has yet to be worked out. There is certainly a form of asceticism, quite different from the penitential practices often associated with Christian holiness, which has emerged. People

² Father Kolvenbach’s address was entitled “A Paschal Love for the World” and it appeared in Promotio Iustitiae, No. 68 (September 1997), 95-103.
network with grassroots organizations, they work at keeping themselves connected and informed about issues like hunger, welfare reform, the death penalty, migrant farmers, care for the environment, immigration, unfair labor practices, landmines, and so forth.

And the work here can be strenuous. People expend time, energy and passion in order to bring about a more just and humane world in whatever ways they can. Sometimes they engage in hunger strikes, boycotts and protest marches, and even suffer imprisonment. Indeed, these are modern-day counterparts of the forms of asceticism embraced, say, by the desert Christians of the third and fourth centuries. When Christians engage in such actions, and where such actions are really expressions of a person’s developing relatedness to God, genuine spiritual development takes place. But all of this needs to be looked at closely and situated in terms of growth in prayer. Holiness can certainly be called “political,” but this always entails a dying to self in order to live for the people of God. What is new is not the element of purgation, the stripping away of disordered attachments, or the acquisition of humility. The newness comes from connecting the individual’s movement towards God with his or her accompanying other human beings in their struggle for justice and peace.

Similarly, Christians are finding new forms of illumination, or rather they are discovering dimensions to the gospel stories which they had not noticed before. At the beginning of the Spiritual Exercises Ignatius offered the following guideline:

The person who gives to another a method and order for meditation or contemplation must faithfully narrate the story to be meditated on or contemplated by merely passing through the principal points and adding only brief clarifications; so that the one who is going to meditate, after
having first accepted the basis of the historical truth, will then go over it and consider it by himself. Thus it would happen that when he finds something that would offer a greater elucidation or apprehension of the story (whether it happens through his own reflection or a divine inspiration in his mind), he will harvest a more delightful taste and more abundant fruit than if the same thing had been more extensively narrated and explained by someone else. It is not, indeed, the abundance of knowledge, but the interior sense and taste of things, that usually satisfies the desire of the soul.³

Ignatius here gives us an idea as to what the illuminative stage is all about: learning the history, coming to insight, relishing the texts, acquiring an “interior sense and taste of things.” What we are seeing today, however, goes beyond what Ignatius knew about the history and even the meaning of the sacred texts. What Christian from the past who loved scripture would not have been thrilled by the developments in our understanding of the Bible? And chief among those developments is our growing knowledge of the social, economic and political situation of the times in which Jesus lived, together with a fresh sense of the prophetic dimension of his ministry. In short, perhaps the present-day form of illumination is our realization that the gospel is not only an ethical message to be applied in new circumstances. In addition, it is still unfolding in front of us. We are grasping aspects of the Jesus story which confirm just how rooted in an everyday human history that story really was. Insights galore into the text are giving way to a fresh appropriation of the overall narrative. We are learning to read

³ This is called the Second Annotation. See The Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius, translated and with commentary by Pierre Wolff (Liguori, MO: Triumph Books, 1997).
the gospel in a way that connects Jesus with the present historical moment. The Jesus of the gospels was born, he lived and he died in solidarity with his people.

As a sign of realized solidarity, therefore, religious life faces a wonderful future. It is being called upon to sacramentalize in its community life and in its apostolic witness that connectedness with the wider human community of which I spoke. Religious communities will increasingly become socially networked communities, and they will find ways to bring that networking to the level of public sign. Our society in particular has a crying need for reconciliation and wholeness. The way we take each other to court so quickly, for example, indicates how fractured we have become as a society. The tensions we face over issues such as race, immigration, abortion, vast discrepancies in income and welfare reform point to a social disaster waiting to happen.

Yet there are many people who do not want to live in that kind of world or that kind of society, and for that reason the Church through its religious communities must constantly hold out another way to be human together. From their corporate searching, acting and discerning religious men and women are fashioning spiritualities of solidarity, a sense of the divine mystery among us that is appropriate to our time and place. When others in the Church look at religious life, they are increasingly going to find there fellow Christians who in their prayer and practice exemplify the globalization of the human soul. Father Adolfo Nicolás, the thirtieth Superior General of the Society of Jesus, used the expression “the globalization of superficiality,” and Pope Francis has often spoken of “the globalization of indifference.” Whichever expression we use, the spiritual corrective to the superficiality and indifference of
our time is going to be the same: the world must get inside of us to the point that we can say, with Saint Paul, that we have been crucified to the world and the world to us (Gal 6:14), for this is where the following of Christ takes us.