The Place Where the Church Experiments with Prayer

Do you suppose I have a spiritual life? I have none, I am indigence, I am silence, I am poverty, I am solitude, for I have renounced spirituality to find God.
—Thomas Merton

At the end of his Apostolic Exhortation on the Consecrated Life, John Paul II wrote to the Church’s religious: “You have not only a glorious history to remember and recount, but also a great history still to be accomplished!” (#110) In a religiously uncertain age, the Pope’s words ring with confidence. What might that future, the “history still to be accomplished,” look like?

With one eye on key moments in the past history of religious life, and above all on the gospels, we have to discern what message the world and our times is sending us. The Church, Vatican II told us, “has always had the duty of scrutinizing the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the gospel. . . . We must therefore recognize and understand the world in which we live, its expectations, its longings, and its often dramatic characteristics.” The charge ought never to be leveled against us, “But you cannot interpret the signs of the times” (Matt 16:3).

For many devout Christians, religious life is the most natural place to turn to if one wants to be schooled in the gospel. It is a wonderful place in which to fathom the richness of the Easter message: “You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth,
who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here” (Mark 16:6). Given the enormous investment of their personnel and resources in works such as retreats, spiritual direction and catechetical formation, religious life certainly appears to be a school with open doors, providing the opportunity for all who desire it of an experience of God in Christ which is liberating and life-giving.

Many people would welcome the chance for an apprenticeship in discipleship and to be schooled in the ways of the Spirit, but they do not want to remain in school forever. They ultimately want, and are called, to live in the world with greater spiritual depth. After all, encountering God in Christ sooner or later takes one directly into the world of the poor and oppressed. Within this world religious life, too, finds its energy and the confirmation of its charism.

Whenever I think about the nature or the future of religious life, I start with the presupposition that the mystery of God will draw some men and women in every age to want, more than anything else in life, to pursue single-mindedly the things of the Spirit. For them, marriage and family, career opportunities, professional advancement and financial security simply cannot be the only options available as they pass through this world. Even the fields of human service, health care and education, or dedication to serving the common good through politics and law, do not sufficiently capture their imaginations and their desires. They seek more from life than what they read about, say, in a college catalog, and they want to give more. To ask why conventional options and goals leave something deep inside of them unsatisfied is to step into that region where grace and nature meet, and where the ways in which God arranges and guides the human world remain wonderfully hidden.
What these God-seekers are looking for is not a higher or purer state of life, or a more secure path to salvation. For God has created a world where different people respond in different ways to the multiple calls and challenges which life holds out to us. And in that diversity of response, the wisdom of God is revealed: all thereby profit, all gifts serve to further the salvation and redemption of the entire human race. The whole people of God is built up by the graces and desires accorded to each and everyone of us, personally and uniquely. In matters of beauty, there does not exist a single standard by which every work of art can be judged, except perhaps this: whatever liberates, heals and builds the human spirit is by definition something of beauty. In matters of religion, we are tugged one way or another by the endlessly fascinating beauty of the mystery of God.

**Three signs of the times**

In his Exhortation, John Paul II wrote: “There is an urgent need for consecrated persons to give more space in their lives to ecumenical prayer and genuine evangelical witness, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit the walls of division and prejudice between Christians can be broken down” (#100). Religious life is uniquely poised to promote greater understanding and unity among Christians. A spirituality that is rooted in the gospel somehow transcends confessional differences, suspicion, and misunderstandings, as well as the insularity that arises from being familiar with only one path to holiness or only one way of experiencing the mystery of God. The longing for unity among Christians, so strongly affirmed by the Second Vatican Council, is one of the major signs of our times.

Yet perhaps just as importantly for the next millennium, ecumenism will need to become increasingly *inter*-religious,
too. Here the Exhortation becomes more cautious. “[I]nstitutes of consecrated life cannot exempt themselves from involvement in [interreligious dialogue], each in accordance with its own charism and following the directives of ecclesiastical authority. . . . In order to foster reciprocal knowledge, respect and charity, religious institutes can also promote appropriate forms of dialogue, marked by cordial friendship and mutual sincerity, with the monastic communities of other religions” (#102). One feature that makes religious life an appropriate context for such dialogue, the Pope notes, is “the freedom of spirit proper to the consecrated life.” Deep interest in, and openness to, the manifestations of the Spirit within the other religious traditions of the world becomes a second major sign of our times.

Furthermore, the Pope continues, religious men and women play a key role in helping their contemporaries find God and develop their own interior life. “[Consecrated persons] are able to offer a response to the longings of their contemporaries, and can help to free them from solutions which are for the most part illusory . . . [T]hey bear witness . . . to the true nature of the search for God. . . . [T]he consecrated person points to Christ loved above all things and to the mystery of the Trinity as the response to the profound longings of the human heart and the ultimate goal of every religious journey sincerely open to transcendence” (#103).

Religious themselves might want to enlarge upon what the Pope says. They know that the consecrated life can instruct the world about the way to God because they have wrestled with life’s empty promises. They have done battle with the demons of narcissism, self-centeredness and sensuality, and even with the prideful pursuit of holiness apart from community. Religious men and women have learned the elementary lessons
of life according to the Spirit. Not every search for transcendence and spiritual depth has led to God; the history of religious life has verified this sober piece of wisdom over and over again. Rightfully, then, the rest of the Church looks to religious life for assistance. The Pope writes: “[C]onsecrated persons are in duty bound to offer a generous welcome and spiritual support to all those who, moved by a thirst for God and a desire to live the demands of faith, turn to them” (#103). The thirst for holiness—for wholeness—is a third major sign of the times.

**Religious life as a laboratory of the Spirit**

Most religious would never think of themselves as scientists, yet more often than not religious life functions as a laboratory of the Spirit. Religious life is probably the most notable place where the Church experiments with prayer. At its healthiest, the institution of religious life provides consecrated men and women the freedom, the encouragement and the support to explore the virtually countless ways in which human beings encounter God. It affords them the freedom to engage in dialogues of the Spirit.

From the wisdom of the desert Christians of the third and fourth centuries to the wisdom of prudent spiritual directors down through the ages, from the proliferation of new forms of religious community in our own time to the great renewal which has been taking place within the traditional religious institutes following Vatican II’s *Decree on the Appropriate Renewal of Religious Life*, such liberty of spirit has been demonstrated over and over again. Experimenting with the ways of the Spirit belongs to the very nature of religious life. By “experimenting” I mean *to have experience of, to confirm through trial and testing, to discover personally or first-hand* the mystery of God.
as it reveals itself within the human world, in human lives and within the recesses of the human heart.

This is not to overlook the fact that even solitary searches for God need to obey the elementary principles of discernment. For discernment has been an indispensable requirement of life according to the gospel from the very beginning, as the New Testament reminds us (1 Cor 12:10). And in the matter of ecumenism, the “results” of prayerful encounter and dialogue with people who walk along other religious paths will always have to be weighed and tested by the wider believing community.

Nevertheless, the history of Christian spirituality is replete with examples of men and women who have charted fresh paths in that vast interior landscape where the human spirit meets the Spirit of God. From the remote desert wastes where they found God without benefit of the Church’s sacraments and liturgical celebrations, to chapel choirs where they encountered God in the faithful, rhythmic singing of the Psalms and daily celebration of the Eucharistic mystery; from the contemplative silence of monastic enclosures and the laborious task of preserving and developing humanity’s precious cultural and religious endowments, to all-absorbing immersion in the everyday world of human societies—the unsung Galilees of ordinary life—religious men and women have pioneered and plumbed the ways of the Spirit.

Sometimes, enthusiasm and inexperience have led to regrettable mistakes. Yet even mistakes could be turned into the stuff of prudence and wisdom, and the rest of the Church thereby profited from the experience. At other times, profound insights won by religious have been greeted with suspicion and
rejected by others in the Church. And these attitudes have likewise led to regrettable errors.

Some years ago I met a missionary sister in India who remarked that she never knew the meaning of the First Commandment until she arrived on the shores of India and saw Hindu temples richly colored with images of gods and goddesses. She understood herself to be in the middle of a pagan, faithless world. That reaction stands in marked contrast to figures like the Benedictine Bede Griffiths, whose ashram in southern India was a testimony to a spiritually intense, prayerful dialogue with the Hinduism he met on all sides. It stands in marked contrast, too, with the explorations undertaken by Thomas Merton into the spirituality underlying Buddhist meditation. After Merton’s fateful pilgrimage to India and the Far East in 1968, some people began wondering what a Christian monk was doing by stepping outside the ascetical depths and revelatory truth of the Christian religious world, while others saw in his pilgrimage a parable of the Christian soul for our time.

The deeply moving testament left by Christian de Cherge, one of the Trappists slain in Algeria just a few years ago, bears eloquent testimony to the intense desire for a communion which transcends religious frontiers. It could even be asked, “What else is religious life, if not a lived desire for that communion between God and the human race which lies at the heart of the mystery of the Church?” Perhaps only a religious could have composed such words:

I know the scorn with which Algerians as a whole can be regarded.
I know also the caricature of Islam which a certain kind of idealism encourages....
For me, Algeria and Islam are something different: they are a body and a soul. I have proclaimed this often enough, I believe, in the sure knowledge of what I have received from it, finding there so often that true strand of the Gospel learnt at my mother’s knee, my very first Church, in Algeria itself in the respect of believing Muslims. . . . This is what I shall be able to do, if God wills—immerse my gaze in that of the Father, to contemplate with him his children of Islam just as he sees them, all shining with the glory of Christ . . .

Sentiments like these can be found in the lives—the breathing, praying testaments—of numerous men and women of our time. We know the names of some of them, like Thomas Merton and Bede Griffiths. But the majority of these pioneers of the interior life are engaged unobtrusively in a patient, prayerful encounter with the Spirit that dwells in temples “not made with [human] hands” (Mark 14:58; see also John 3:24). They provide dramatic confirmation of that fact that we are really becoming a world church. Cardinal Ratzinger recently observed: “We are very attentive not to quench the flame of the appropriation and creation of an Asian identity for the Catholic faith. Perhaps this is one of the greatest challenges for the Church of the third millennium, to bring faith in Christ, the Son of God made man, finally to the Asian soul.” If this appropriation is ever to be

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1 The entire text of “Testament of a murdered monk” can be found in The Tablet (June 8, 1996), 749. It can also be found in the Christian Spirituality Bulletin 5:2 (Fall 1997), 14. In the same issue on pages 15-17, see Armand Veilleux, “The Importance of the Monastic Community and the Church in the Contemplative Life.”
realized, it surely will not happen by bypassing the great religious traditions of the world. There will be no great breakthroughs into the Asian soul without prayerful, honest, and respectful yet discerning encounter with the religions of Asia. This is something Christian religious have recognized for centuries.

**Religious life as an experiment with God**

But it is not only at the macro level of inter-religious dialogue that religious life serves the Church. On the micro level of individual faith-experience, the lives of religious men and women sometimes become “divine experiments.” The fact that such experiments take place is vitally important to all of us. Religious men and women have traditionally been among the most prominent writers on the interior life. Their insight into human nature, their skill at discerning the religious significance of major cultural and social forces at work in the world, and their efforts to pray with the whole of their lives, have often enabled countless others to live out their faith more steadily and confidently. In their own time, they helped to guide their contemporaries through many a wilderness and along many an inner journey, and to this day through their writings they remain some of our best teachers.

Not all religious write and lecture, of course; not all are engaged in the ministry of spiritual direction. Yet together, as communities, they have helped to deepen the interiority of the whole people of God. Together they help to define and protect the freedom all believers enjoy in Christ to seek the face of God, each one of us in his or her own particular ways.

The wise insight religious gained, however, was frequently won at great personal cost. One recalls, for example, John of the Cross enduring hostility and imprisonment, and in that
experience undertaking the composition of *The Spiritual Canticle*. Or Ignatius Loyola’s terrible personal battle with scruples, which nearly drove him to suicide. Or Teresa of Lisieux enduring severe desolation of spirit, and dying of tuberculosis as a young woman. What those religious suffered was no greater than what the vast majority of men and women intent on loving and serving God often have to endure. But the pioneers pave the way for the rest of us so that we can learn how to make sense of the hard interior events or moments that inevitably accompany growth in the Spirit, and not lose our way.

Lest any of us think that religious life no longer has a clear mission, it is worth pausing a moment to realize how desperately modern society needs women and men of the Spirit. Michael Downey describes the present situation this way:

The culture that breeds narcissism, pragmatism, and unbridled restlessness is a dead end, and this is being learned at great personal cost to individuals, communities, and nations. It is my view that people today are beginning to realize that this kind of culture does not work. It has betrayed us. It has not delivered on its promise. It has failed to satisfy the deepest desires of the human heart, and it has resulted in fragmentation and depersonalization of a magnitude previously unimagined. We are looking for another way. And this calls for the cultivation of an awareness of levels of reality beyond the self and what is immediately apparent, beyond what is practical, and what keeps us constantly stimulated. The culture in which we live has numbed us to the deep reserves of spirituality within. … People today are seeking to find those deep reserves of spirituality within because they know that they are trapped
by self-centeredness, utilitarianism, and agitation, and have decided that this is simply no way to live.\(^2\)

Toward the close of his Exhortation, John Paul recalled one of the visionary experiences of Teresa of Avila. In that vision Jesus asked her, reassuringly: “For what would become of the world if it were not for religious?” In response, John Paul quotes from Paul VI: “Without this concrete sign there would be danger that the charity which animates the entire Church would grow cold, that the saving paradox of the Gospel would be blunted, and that the ‘salt’ of faith would lose its savor in a world undergoing secularization.” Then John Paul adds his own words: “The church needs consecrated persons who, even before committing themselves to the service of this or that noble cause, allow themselves to be transformed by God’s grace and conform themselves fully to the Gospel” (#105).

In other words, the Church of tomorrow is going to need people experienced in the ways of the Spirit—a Spirit that is sometimes gentle and at other times relentless. It will need—because humanity’s thirst for transcendence will otherwise be blind—men and women who are in touch with the “deep reserves of spirituality within.” Religious life is the Church’s charter school.

[1997]