16.

We Never Stop Growing

The reasons why someone enters a religious community may not be the same reasons why, as the years go by, the person remains in it. I cannot help but think of Jesus’ first disciples, how they responded to his invitation and set out so enthusiastically without knowing everything that lay ahead; how they gradually learned that their initial understanding of the kingdom of God had to be stretched in order to take into account rejection, humiliation, betrayal, and death; and how their experience of Easter inspired them to take a giant leap of faith from the villages and towns of Galilee into the great cities of the Empire and beyond.

At one point during the course of his ministry, when many of his followers had started to find his teaching problematic, Jesus asked the Twelve, “Do you also want to leave?” (John 6:67) They remained, of course. And the reason they gave was as profound as it was brief: “Lord, to whom shall we go? Your words are words of eternal life.” The question “To whom shall we go?” could inadvertently be interpreted to mean that the Twelve had agreed to stay with Jesus simply because they were too dull to think of anything better to do with their lives, if it were not for the declaration that follows.

The gospels leave to our imaginations just how long it took the disciples to realize that Jesus was able to teach the words of eternal life because he was the word of eternal life. The process of growing awareness and deepening faith on the part of the disciples is something to which religious men and women can readily relate. The Twelve stayed with Jesus out of commitment
and faith, not because they had colorless imaginations and sluggish hearts.

**Why do they join?**

Some people join a religious community because they have been attracted to the particular work of that community in hospitals, schools, foreign missions, houses of prayer, serving the poorest of the poor, and so on. They may indeed spend the whole of their religious lives deeply engaged by the major work of their institute, with a blessed sense of fulfillment and peace. Nevertheless, it occasionally happens that the work one envisions or undertakes at the outset is not the work that one eventually does. And this occurs, not because of a mere change of assignment or the emergence of a new apostolic need, but because one becomes more conscious of the hand of God in one’s own life. The work of God little by little reveals itself as wider and deeper than the particular projects or works undertaken by religious communities.

Coming to know the mystery of God and how God is ever at work in human lives is the real project of a lifetime. There are no shortcuts to the graced vision that finds God readily in all things and rejoices each day in the wonders of God’s love. Jesus’ warning “What does anyone gain by winning the whole world at the cost of his life?” (Mark 8:36) assumes a curious application in the case of religious. We are not expected to set about winning the world for the gospel at the expense of our own union with the mystery of God. Saint Paul made a similar point when he wrote to the Corinthians: “I may have faith enough to move mountains . . . I may give all I possess to the needy, I may give my body to be burnt, but if I have no love, I gain nothing by it” (1 Cor 13:2-3)
While some joined their religious communities on the basis of work and mission, others joined because they were drawn by the holiness and zeal of one or more of its members. Whenever religious men and women give evidence of having discovered the pearl of great price, their very humanity becomes immensely challenging and appealing, especially for young people trying to figure out what to make of their own lives. The human being fully alive not only glorifies God; the man or woman who is fully alive demonstrates to the rest of us the beauty and mystery of which we too are capable. To paraphrase St. Irenaeus, a man or woman fully alive brings glory to the whole human race. Eventually, every religious should be able to identify with the discovery of the Samaritan villagers: “It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world” (John 4:42).

If in the beginning one was struck by the example or witness of individual religious, as time goes on the person discovers that Presence in their own hearts which fashions each of us ever more closely in the image of Christ. Religious men and women experience the power of the Spirit within themselves, a power that over time produces in them the same features of freedom, generosity, service, and faith that they had first spotted in someone else. In time one becomes what one admires and loves.

**Why do they stay?**

It is relatively easy, then, to identify reasons why men and women enter religious life. The reasons why they remain may be far less obvious. Vocational vision is hard to sustain over a long period of time, and even when one does manage to sustain it the initial glow tends to fade. Human life has its stages. Thus
the way we find God at one point in our lives is not likely to be the way we encounter God later. A religious vocation, insofar as it is the unfolding of a desire to follow Jesus, embraces the whole world. Through the vows one joins Jesus in his mission—a mission which of its nature extends to all humanity. Unfortunately, the world cannot be healed in one person’s lifetime, it cannot be instructed in a single lifetime, and it cannot be brought back to God by a single life.

The parables of Jesus make use of the images of seed and harvest, the idea being that between the sowing and the reaping there is a long interval; not until the end of the age will we ever get a full picture of the unfolding of God's redemptive plan (Matt 13:39-40). We are going to die without seeing our heart's central desire realized. The Spirit, we confidently believe, will raise up others after us who will want to follow Jesus as totally and energetically as the Twelve did. No matter what we once imagined we might one day accomplish with and for Christ, we realize that in the end the work of redemption is not in our hands. By ourselves we cannot radically change the world. The only thing we can do in the time allotted to us is to join Jesus in the long historical process of the world's being transformed, or redeemed, or set free from darkness and sin. Coming to this insight is intellectually easy, but living with it and experiencing its truth can tax our prayer and our patience.

What sustains a religious vocation, it seems to me, is that men and women in religious life actually experience God at work in themselves and in the world. This experience, furthermore, becomes so pervasive and runs so deep that it creates a distinctive way of being human. Years of religious practice, of attempting to follow Jesus through the observance of the vows, of devoting time and energy to prayer and
contemplation, and of reaching out to others in tireless service have a lasting effect on our nature and impress themselves on our deepest personhood.

Yet an integral part of this lifelong encounter with the mystery of God is the discovery of our common humanity. The more time one spends in the company of God, the more one grasps how much he or she shares the human condition. One never lives apart from the wider human experience, but within it. Even Christian hermits will testify to this important lesson. In other words, it belongs to the essence of religious life to create and foster a far-reaching solidarity with all men and women. We share their history; their spiritual fortunes are inextricably bound up with ours. The discovery of God eventually leads to a mindfulness of the world. Or to state the matter with a bit more spiritual precision, to know God is to discover the depth of God’s love for the world.

An attentiveness to the world as loved by God, an attentiveness which is paradoxically both spontaneous and enduring, is one of the most remarkable features of the consciousness of men and women in religious life. What sustains them in their calling, in other words, is their love for God's people and the experience which religious life makes available of feeling intensely and joyously the life of the people of God. This holds true for those who belong to contemplative communities as much as for those who entered active ones.

**Facing the future**

Standing on the threshold of a millennium, it is tempting to speculate about the future of Christian religious life and even of the Church itself. Besides, we desperately need visionaries to help us articulate our hopes and to urge upon us an abiding confidence that the risen Jesus always walks ahead of us. I
suspect that religious life will take on an increasingly contemplative stamp, that it will dip more and more into the spiritual and ascetical traditions of the other major world religions, and that as some institutes die there will be many creative efforts to raise up new ones. Given the severe strains on the earth’s resources and the longing so many have for a more equitable distribution of them, no form of religious life can hope to survive that fails to grasp the connection between faith and justice. Yet my eyes, at least, cannot see much beyond where we are today. That religious life is a sacrament of solidarity, however, I have no doubt. Its future is going to depend upon how well it speaks to the deepest spiritual aspirations and practical idealism of young men and women. That solidarity, concretely lived and lovingly practiced across the length and breadth of a lifetime, is a major aspiration of men and women today—a sign of our times—is something I sincerely believe. At least I can say that while this may not have been the sort of thinking which led me to enter religious life, the experience of solidarity as a dimension of my experience of God has confirmed that initial decision over and over again.

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