

THE RELIGIOUS WOMAN IN THE CHURCH

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Religious life, the religious woman, and the Church

IN HIS GIFT to the Church of religious life, God followed the pattern of creation and incarnation. He brought into being a reality which is a new and intense expression of the baptismal commitment, one which can unite christians with himself and with each other in such a way as to promote the deepest values in on-going creation. He did this in every case by a personal and individual call. By a free initiative, he invited certain christians to receive his word, respond with the gift of their whole being, and utter that word individually and corporately for the benefit of mankind. The loving power of God, creative and incarnational, is therefore the source of religious life in the Church. It is also the energy which sustains that life and the dynamism of love which propels it towards its goal: the union of all things in the ultimate fulness of Christ. This loving power, however, is exercised in specific circumstances of time and place. It is conditioned, again in the order of the incarnation, by historical and social limitations and by opportunities, cultural, institutional and individual. Therefore, over its whole history, religious life has manifested not only the irruption of God into the human condition which, prefigured in Abraham, Moses and the prophets, had its supreme expression in Jesus Christ; but it has also reflected the response of human persons according to their understanding of the divine gift and according to their moment in history.

By the fact that it is connected with creation and with the movement towards the assumption of all things in Christ, as well as by its being directed to the benefit of the whole world, the religious life is open to anyone whom God calls. It can be expressed both by men and by women. The complementarity indicated in Genesis suggests that there would be something missing from the richness of the Church if either expression were under-developed, or were not developed according to its true nature and potential. The unique

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role of man in the work of redemption, the call of the apostles and the mission of the early Church, makes congruent Christ's call to men to spend themselves and to be sent in his love for the sake of the kingdom, the spread of the gospel and the gathering of God's scattered children for the glory of the Father. The unique role of woman in the incarnation where, given the divine plan, Christ needed a human mother in order to become man, suggests that there may be similar need of total self-giving to God on the part of women if the whole Christ is to come to fulfilment. Of course, in itself religious life, like all life, is one. Its basic nature, purposes and functions are the same for whoever lives it, and there is a sense in which conceptually it pre-figures that oneness of all in Christ, in which there will be neither Jew nor Gentile, bond nor free, male nor female. However, until the fulness of Christ comes, there are differences of approach and emphasis according to God's gifts; and these are sufficiently marked to give the religious woman a specific place and role in the Church.

Certainly from early times a place and role have been recognised. The abbeys of Hilda and Lioba, the medieval mysticism of Gertrude and Mechtilde, the courageous initiative of Clare, Teresa's great reform, the new ideas of the nineteenth-century foundresses, the contemporary forms of consecration as understood by Mother Teresa of Calcutta or Soeur Marie de Bethléem, are so many different ways in which the religious woman has responded to God's call to her and has enriched the Church by her response. But she has always had to break new ground with faith and persistence. More than the man religious, she has been affected by the impact of society on her chosen form of life, whether it was the pressure of feudalism insisting on her enclosure or the pressure of technological society insisting on her involvement. In one sense, in the consecrated virgins and widows of the first centuries, she appreciated early her true identity and meaning, finding both in God's choice and action in her: a woman called by God in mutual love to be in a special way at the service of the Church for others. But there was a long wait before the evolution of history gave her the chance of living fully the apostolic possibilities of her calling, as she understood them, in a stable form of organized religious life in community. She has needed to disengage herself gradually from the idea that hers was simply an adaptation of the consecrated life structured for men. She has also needed to free herself from the effects of a social order that had outlived its time. More recently still, she has needed to think through

the deep values of her consecration and commitment in the light of developments in the Church and in the world, more rapid and possibly more far-reaching than any in previous history. The process of exploration and discernment in which she has constantly been involved, however, have never been ends in themselves. All are part of the great positive response to Christ which the religious woman is trying to make at no matter what point in the Church's development.

That response involves the task of consecrating the life-giving, magnetic and unitive force in creation which Teilhard de Chardin calls the eternal feminine. The religious has to bring the complementarity of her consecrated being, life and action as woman to religious life in the Church, and therefore to the process of uniting all things and all men in Christ. What does this imply? It seems to mean that she must offer a particular expression of God in the Church, an expression complementary to that offered by the religious man. As a theological reality, this expression will involve a participation in what we could call the motherhood of God, and a living, precisely as woman, of those aspects of the Church that are best expressed in the imagery of virgin, bride and mother, and are most beautifully figured in our Lady. As a historically and socially conditioned reality, the expression will involve an understanding of and reaching out to the needs of the day, which can be responsibly undertaken only if it is based on a certain awareness of how those needs have evolved, and how the position of the religious woman has evolved with regard to them. As an existential reality, the expression invites a thinking through of the whole question of present renewal, relationships, service and orientation.

The religious woman: a complementary expression of God in the Church

The fact that Christ is the point of convergence where God and the world meet, means that it is he who gives to the world its direction and its goal. He is the Lord of history, since history is the unfolding of the evolutionary process; and it is in history that the effects of the incarnation are applied to the individual christian through sacramental encounter with the risen Christ. This encounter takes place in the Church. The Church therefore has a unique place in the history of a humanity in progress. She is the living instrument, present in the world, by which Christ achieves his ultimate fulness. The power of his love is carried in her as a life-force giving her tremendous resources for growth and enabling her to renew the life

of the world. To put it another way, the Church is the central axis through which evolution must pass. Therefore, if the world is to live, mature and be saved, it can only happen through the Church, since through her passes the current of love and life that is directly oriented to the fulness of Christ.

Scripture describes this life-giving nature of the Church through an abundance of images which emphasize life, growth and purpose. Some, such as the figures of the pilgrim people led by men of God's choice, or of the shepherd tending the flock which is Yahweh's, are masculine in their evocation.¹ Other images are frankly feminine. In a special way the Church is described as mother,² the spouse of the lamb,³ the new Jerusalem descending as a bride, the bride whom Christ nourishes and cherishes.⁴

Using a different figure again, though one which in its own way is closely related to the pauline and johannine image of the woman-Church, a jesuit thinker of our own times has brought a new insight to bear on the feminine element in the concept of the Church as bearer of the life-in-Christ. Teilhard describes the Church phenomenologically as a phylum, that is, as a living 'bundle' or group which is one of the natural unities of life, and which, when it has reached its maximum growth and stability, goes on multiplying without any further diversification. For him the Church is the central phylum of love inserted by God into the evolutionary process. It holds the key to man's progress because, not only does it unite men through love, and therefore differentiates and personalizes them, but it does so in Christ in whom alone persons can be united centre to centre. Union in Christ forges the multiplicity of the world into a whole, it fosters life, nurtures progress, helps the body to grow. The Church is thus a phylum of love inserted by God into the human situation to do a work which in some of its aspects at least is specifically feminine. The communication of life, nurturing, fostering, keeping, unifying, loving in order to help grow at any and every age – these are typically womanly activities. Yet in and through the Church they are the activities of Christ.

The thought to which this leads reaches beyond the fact that the Church is often imaged as a woman to the more basic question: why should this be so? It is not enough to answer that Israel was figured in this way, as that only carries the question one step further back.

¹ Cf Isai 40, 11; Ezek 34, 11.

² Cf Gal 4, 26.

³ Cf Apoc 19, 7; 21, 2.

⁴ Cf Apoc 21, 1; Eph 5, 29.

If both Israel and the Church are presented as expressions of that 'eternal feminine' which finds its fullest beauty in our Lady, is it not because the 'eternal feminine' itself has its origin, like everything else, in God? It was an English woman of consecrated life, Julian of Norwich (1342 – about 1416), a recluse who may have had some connections with the benedictines, who gave lovely expression to the idea of God as mother and source of all motherhood. However, the concept did not originate with her. St Anselm of Canterbury (1033–1109) had already fostered devotion to 'our Lord, our Mother' in his widely used *Orationes*. The cistercians and carthusians spread it by the use of these prayers in their monasteries, and women such as Marguerite d'Oyngt (d. 1310) and Mechtilde of Hackeborn (d. 1298) took it up. Julian was therefore in a well-established tradition when she based her consideration of God as Mother on some of the fundamental truths of faith: creation, incarnation and redemption, and the providence by which God gives, maintains and increases in us both natural and supernatural life. She attributed motherhood explicitly to Christ in whom all things were made and who therefore mothered us by bringing us to natural life 'in our kind making'. As the incarnate Word, he also has a 'motherhood of mercy', bringing us to supernatural life in the suffering and pain of his passion, as a mother brings forth her child in anguish. Still greater emphasis is laid on Christ's 'motherhood of working', which Julian describes as 'the service and office of Motherhood in all things' which 'none might or could, nor ever should do to the full but he alone'. In a passage which speaks clearly of the union of Christ with his Church and of the identification of life of Christ and the life of the Church, Julian describes Christ's motherhood of working in terms of the offices of a human mother. He gives life; he feeds and nourishes through the sacraments; he cherishes; he keeps, corrects and sustains. This aspect of God's being, life and love needs personal expression in the Church, and what Julian appreciated in the fourteenth century still needs its witnesses today.

God as source of the feminine and of its expression in terms of woman is also described in scripture in ways which the Church has uniquely made her own. Several times in the prophet Isaiah for example, Yahweh compares himself to a mother: 'I will console you, like a mother caressing her son';⁵ 'Can a woman forget her child? Even if she should forget, I will not forget you'.⁶ There are also the

⁵ Isai 66, 13.

⁶ Isai 49, 15.

references to Israel as first-born of Yahweh, and Christ's expressive image to describe the motherly aspect of love when he mourned Jerusalem's refusal to be gathered to him 'as a hen gathers her chickens under her wings'.⁷

More often the feminine is thought of as the object of Yahweh's love: his people, his Church. The daughter of Zion is the personification of Israel, chosen and beloved as a virgin who belongs to the Lord, and over whom he rejoices 'as a bridegroom rejoices over the bride'.⁸ She is also a mother in pain, a mystical and eschatological figure, united with the Lord and awaiting her deliverance of the messianic hope.⁹ She is the little one, the dwelling of God,¹⁰ the handmaid in faith.¹¹ Figured in Jerusalem, she is mother, bride and queen, faltering, faithless and restored.

Because of his clear recognition of the continuity between Israel and the Church, St Paul took up the feminine image, and especially the imagery of marriage, to describe the relation of Christ with his Church. He told the galatians that they were children, not of a slave-girl but of a free-born wife,¹² the Jerusalem above, who 'is free and is our mother'.¹³ In writing to the ephesians, he drew a parallel between human marriage and the marriage of Christ to his Church, letting the two concepts illumine each other, so that the Church is presented ideally as a bride, holy and faultless, loved by Christ as a man loves his own body in loving his wife.¹⁴

In some ways more penetratingly still, St John brought together the elements of the eternal feminine in his apocalyptic vision of the woman crowned with twelve stars, clothed with the sun, and with the moon under her feet. In a sense, she is Israel bringing forth the messiah as culmination of her centuries of waiting. In another sense, she is the Church who will bring him forth to the end of time. In a full sense, she is Mary daughter of Zion, ark of the covenant, mother of the messiah and figure of the Church, whose model she is and whose vocation of redemptive and sanctifying maternity she typifies in a unique way. The personification of christian response to God is our Lady. She gives it its fullest form: a total adherence to God in Jesus Christ through the power of the Spirit, lived in such a way that the Word can be uttered through her for the salvation of all mankind in faith, purity, fidelity and loving transparency. She is the

⁷ Mt 23,37.

⁹ Cf Jer 4, 31; Mic 4, 10.

¹¹ Cf 2 Ezz 9, 45.

¹³ Gal 4, 26.

⁸ Isai 62, 5.

¹⁰ Cf Isai 62, 11; Zech 2, 10.

¹² Cf Gal 4, 31.

¹⁴ Cf Eph 5, 21-32.

purest expression of the motherhood of God and of the meaning of the Church which is so closely related to that motherhood. Like the Church she is virgin and mother, and she is somehow identical with the Church in her bridal and maternal relations. In giving birth to the one Christ, Mary bore all his members, given to her symbolically in the person of St John; in giving birth to Christ's members, multitudinous in space and time, the Church bears the one Christ, growing towards his fulness. Vatican II went a long way in exploring the intimate inter-relation of the Church and the Mother of God;¹⁵ but it was perhaps the frenchman, Claudel, who expressed it most trenchantly when he referred to her in *L'Épée et le Miroir* as 'This woman who is the Church'. Setting the mystery against a wider background, Teilhard connected it with the whole feminine element in creation, when he thought of the feminine as the zone of meeting between God and the earth, the zone in which the generation and plenitude of Christ are consummated throughout the centuries. 'I am the Church, the bride of Christ. I am Mary the Virgin, mother of all human kind'.

If the Church herself, as a phylum of love in creation, expresses a divine service which from some points of view has markedly feminine characteristics and which is modelled on the life and service of our Lady, it seems to follow that christian women and more especially religious women have a specific role by the very fact of their womanhood: to show within the Church the mother-love of God.

The religious woman: part of a phylum of love within the Church

Just as the Church is a phylum of love within humanity, so it would seem that religious life, as an intense and wholly personalized expression of the christian phenomenon, is a phylum freely given by God within the Church. The religious professes to incarnate the very essence of christianity in its love, its gratuitousness, its relation to the Father in Christ through the Spirit, its freedom, its mission to heal, reconcile and spread the good news of salvation by a total self-giving to Christ in community which involves all that one has and is. He or she undertakes christian life in a particular form of intensity visibly related to the Church. This life has love for its meaning as Christ's had. It was with great perception that St Thérèse of Lisieux saw not only her own vocation but that of all religious in relation to the Church as a concentration of love: 'At the

¹⁵ *Lumen Gentium*, 63-65.

heart of the Church, my Mother, I will be love'. The mother-love of God that Thérèse saw mirrored so closely in her vocation is at the core of religious life. As such and by whomever it is lived, by the very fact of its being a phylum in the Church and an expression of the Church, religious life is concerned with love and with the love that gives life. For all religious it involves a communication of Christ received, interiorized, nurtured, uttered and communicated in a response of love.

The woman religious is called to enter into this precisely as woman. It is her strength that this aspect of the life of the Church and of religious life calls on her natural gifts and builds on them. It is her joy that it points to her place in the evolving Church. Her vocation, like Mary's, is to be Church, to figure the Church in its total union with Christ by her consecration; in its virginity by her chastity; in its fecundity by her spiritual fruitfulness; in its direction to the Father by her obedience; in its building to the fulness of Christ by her life, prayer and service. To live this out permanently and publicly in a visible witness is the fundamental call of every religious woman. The transcendence of God, the relation to Christ, the power of the Spirit, the message of the gospel, the growth of the Church towards the fulness of Christ, and the life in community which enables her to deepen and manifest these realities: all these are, for her, constant priorities.

The religious woman: a socially and historically conditioned figure in the evolution of the Church

The religious woman, however, always lives in the Church at a particular place and point in history; and this gives rise to a further priority which, even if it is constant in its nature, is open to great variety and change in its manifestations. This is the reading of the signs of the times and the response to the needs of the day. Union with Christ means participation in his mission and his mission is to all men. How in fact can the religious woman share in this mission, concretely, in her own situation? The answer can never be absolute. It must be qualified according to culture, time and place; for the very question is a reminder that religious life is not only a theological reality in the Church: it is also a reality that is socially and historically conditioned.

As long as the conditioning resulted in religious life being considered as 'the state of perfection', that is, as the condition of life thought to be most conducive to perfection, there was naturally little

preoccupation among religious with questions of change and evolution. The general concept carried with it an implication of having arrived, rather than of being still in the process of search and development proper to a pilgrim people. However, once the thinking of Vatican II emphasised the dynamic and evolutionary, and once the letter *Evangelica Testificatio* stressed religious *life* rather than religious *state*, a new light was thrown on the whole development of religious life. This was especially true of the life of religious women. Because its sociological conditioning had long outlived the social pattern which originally determined it, the need of change in women's congregations was more obvious than in those for men. The continuous elements in the life of the religious woman emerged in contrast with the transient and the expendable. She saw her way of life for what it is: a God-given response within the Church to a divine initiative in specific cultural and social circumstances, which contains within its gift the possibility of evolution and future development, precisely because it is life, but which, at the same time, is conditioned by the society into which it is inserted and in which it grows. Of course, God's call in itself is not dependent on historical circumstances, and it is this independence which makes the reality of religious life more than a social phenomenon. However, existentially the call is given in a particular historical context. The fact that it is given for others, and that it involves a loving relationship with the Lord of history, means that the persons who receive and respond to it are often sensitive to the fundamental needs and trends of their times with a sensitivity of faith. They see these needs with a vision of faith. God works in and through them, and it is with something of the divine insight that they are completely people of their time: all the more so, perhaps, for being sometimes ahead of it.

In these circumstances, an appreciation of some of the main lines of evolution in religious life for women takes on a new importance. The experience of the past contains the elements which have formed the present situation, and some of the great religious women of former times have valuable insights to share. Their conditions may have been different, but the challenges facing them as they tried to hear and respond to God's word were curiously like our own. Like us, they belonged to that religious life of the west which, broadly speaking, has evolved in correspondence to society and has reflected its growth and its mutations. The life of the desert fathers, for example, and the gradual evolution of cenobitical consecration was related, at least to some extent, to the complex social and ecclesias-

tical conditions which obtained during the decline and eventual collapse of the roman empire. The peaceful revolution of monasticism matched the barbarian invasions. There is an intimate connection between the medieval friars and the rise of the towns and universities. The apostolic companies were coincidental with the counter-reformation, the later renaissance and the age of discovery, while the nineteenth-century congregations which expressed union with Christ in immediate service to one's neighbour, social, educational, medical or missionary, were to some extent a response of faith to the opportunities offered by the french revolution and to the needs resulting from liberalism, industrialism and colonial expansion. In these large mutations, the woman religious had her part, sometimes freed but more often hampered by contemporary social structures.

In many instances, she was associated with the charism of one or other of the great founders. She developed a form of religious life which was immediately connected with his inspiration, though without being simply an adaptation of what was really meant as a masculine life-style. It was a case of expressing in the social forms then open to a woman the spirit and initiative which were the founder's charism. In this way, St Scholastica gave a woman's expression to the spirit and life-style of St Benedict; St Clare expressed the initiative of St Francis of Assisi; St Louise de Marillac that of St Vincent de Paul. With greater freedom, the spiritual genius of St Jane Frances de Chantal complemented that of St Francis de Sales. On the whole, such expressions had to be restrained and more or less confined to cloistered living, because, in a society which held that woman should be either married or enclosed, it was difficult to envisage in practice any kind of third alternative. The number of congregations of women who to this day depend ultimately on a man as their superior general is a result of social circumstances in which this was the normal and expected procedure.

Not all religious women, however, were called in this way. Even during the pre-revolutionary period, there were some whose response to needs in the Church did not imply the existence of a masculine counterpart. There were the sixteenth and seventeenth-century foundresses in whom the apostolic call was strong. They came to see that one natural outcome of consecration to the Christ who was sent by the Father is a participation in his mission expressed in apostolic service; and they strove to make such service a practical possibility. To these women, the decline of the monasteries and the effects of the reformation, of persecution and of the wars of religion

brought a new and urgent word of God. Christ in the poor, the sick, the ignorant, the unschooled, the uncared for, called forth a response of love and complete dedication. For St Angela Merici in Italy, Anne de Xainctonge and St Jeanne de Lestonnac in France, and Mary Ward in Britain, a womanly service free from enclosure was a normal expression of their religious consecration. But they were ahead of their time. They tried to express the essence of their religious life in social forms which required that the freedom of the children of God be matched by a similar freedom among the children of men. So they had to struggle with social and ecclesiastical pressures which, in the two centuries after Trent, increasingly identified religious life for women with the structures of enclosure. They were the seekers. They sensed the divine impulse. They read the needs of their day and they were open to them: but it was not until the french revolution swept away the existing social order that their ideas could really gain ground.

Fortunate, then, were those religious women who had not only a personal charism but historical conditions which enabled them to express it. These were the foundresses who lived at the key points of social mutation and who were able to seize the spirit of their age, however unconsciously, and express God's love through it. Society seems to have a pattern in its evolution. After some considerable period of development on a given level, the converging social focus seems to force a break-through to something higher. There is a discovery or a sudden development or a revolution. Social patterns change or transform themselves: or they crumble and a new life is born. At such times, the woman's closeness to the source of life, and her sensitivity as to its communication, can prompt her to catalyse the forces of evolution and social explosion, and use them to bring about new religious birth. Such was the insight of Teresa of Avila which, however paradoxical its form, brought about a reform of religious life for cloistered women that was no less a response to the great social mutation of the sixteenth century than were the renaissance, the *conquistadores* and the reformation. A similar insight was that of the french women-foundresses at the time of the great revolution and Napoleon. Julie Billiart, founding in 1804 a congregation that would express its consecrated love of Christ in an apostolate of education addressed to all who were in need, was instinctively interpreting the collapse of the old social order and the liberty, equality and fraternity of the revolution in terms of religious life. The finger on the pulse of the times that was so striking a

characteristic of Teresa and Julie, enabled them to do in their more favourable circumstances what other religious, less happily placed, could not achieve.

Especially during the nineteenth and early twentieth century, there was yet another role for the religious woman: she was a leaven in a society which increasingly needed the contribution of her services. The extension of the Church to newly explored areas of the world in the Americas, Africa, Asia and Australia raised the question of apostolic service in an acute form. There was need for the presence and action of consecrated women with people who were sick and suffering or who were in need of education. Sisters were wanted in the mission centres and social services, in the parishes and catechetical groups. The conditions created by the industrial revolution, by political liberalism and by the emergence of new social classes, the economic, social and professional movement for women's rights and suffrage, the development of education for all, were trends that made heavy demands on the services of religious women so recently made available by the social consequences of the french revolution, but not yet supported by a form of religious life which could bring out their real meaning: the manifestation in mission of consecration to Christ.

By 1965, the accelerated pace of development and change, the sheer magnitude of the needs and the accepted tradition of religious life had gradually placed the religious woman in a situation which the challenge of Vatican II revealed to her in all its ambiguity. Working as a leaven in society, she found herself often with the social and religious structures of a previous generation, with the impossibility of reaching out to what she thought should be done, with a tendency sometimes to identify her religious call with her work, with a formation often inadequate to meet apostolic needs, and with the problems arising both from national crises and crises within the Church. In some parts of the world, the invitation to return to the gospel and the spirit of her foundress as a context for discerning the signs of the times was bound to have an electric effect on her, precisely because, by the time of Vatican II, she was so socially and educationally conditioned that she was poised to move immediately and radically on the Council's suggestions. Probably no group in the Church has taken renewal more seriously than the women religious. In no group has its effects appeared more obviously. Reactions to those effects, inevitably, are varied, and it would be premature to draw definite conclusions as yet; but history suggests that at times of violent change it has not infrequently been the women

religious who have sensed the direction of the Spirit. Is it too much to hope that, if they are true to their calling, they may again be a saving force in the Church?

The religious woman existentially in the Church

If religious women are indeed to be such a force, it must be in the context of a new situation which the Church herself recognizes as holding society captive by a tremendous paradox. Many factors have combined to bring about today's multi-faceted crisis – social, racial, political, educational, economic. Among them are two which are particularly important to the religious woman: first, the re-distribution of emphasis in theology which, because of an urgent and praiseworthy desire to speak significantly to today's world, sets its concentration rather heavily on man in his immediate situation; and secondly, the growing awareness of injustice in the world as a call to christian conscience for study and action. The first of these factors can condition the religious woman's sense of identity and meaning today; the second can have major effects on the development of her apostolate.

It is not within the scope of this paper to enter into a discussion of the new theology as such. However, it is an important fact that, since the significance of religious life can properly be understood only from the standpoint of theology, much of the religious woman's appreciation of her call, her consecration and her mission will depend on the kind of theology that she accepts. If she holds that the key to theology is revelation, a historical faith which can be restated in the idiom of the times and which is open to new and contingent emphases but not to change that could alter its very nature, she will see today's movements, whether of religious renewal or of promotion of women, in the context of a personal God whose grace brings the action of the supernatural into her life. Religious life will be by definition a life of personal relationship with Christ, the Son of God, oriented towards that eventual fulness of all things in him which starts in the love and service of his people here and now. If her emphasis attaches less importance to God's transcendence, but stresses rather his immanence, she will start from union with Christ in the service of others. She will gradually move to the sense of 'all things in him' by the very fact that the Christ whom she serves is the first born of creation and unifies all things;¹⁶ but in the mean-

¹⁶ Cf Col 1.

time she may tend to greater activity, and see the causes in hand as immediate ends in themselves. Exaggeration in either direction is unhelpful; but, whereas the temptation of a previous generation was to withdraw so completely from society as to be often out of touch with it altogether, the present-day temptation may be to become so involved in society as to be out of touch with other realities. In the former case the life of the religious woman could become frustrated or warped. In the latter, it could gradually disappear completely.

Yet the Church has rarely needed religious more than at the present time; and, in her delineation of the needs of the world today, she implies a strong appeal to those who, like religious women, are deeply involved in the promotion of life, growth and unity in Christ. In the words of the Synod of 1971, the world situation is paradoxical. On the one hand there are powerful and dynamic forces working towards unity: the growing awareness of the basic equality and human dignity of all men, the possibilities of unity that arise from science, simultaneous communication and economic interdependence, and the common responsibility for the resources of the biosphere. On the other hand, within this perspective of unity, the forces of division and antagonism seem to be gaining strength: inter-racial tensions, the arms race, unjust concentrations of wealth and power, social discrimination, economic and political oppression, and the voiceless injustices which constitute the nucleus of today's problems, and whose solution requires the undertaking of new tasks and functions in every sector of society. The newness of the situation does not lie so much in its components, because war, discrimination, oppression and greed have been with us since the beginning of history, but rather in its universality, its intensity and in the reaction that it is beginning to arouse. It is universal precisely because it is a world situation. It affects everyone; and, for the first time, thinking persons are concerned about the development of world concern, about a planetary conscience and about the future of the biosphere. The situation is tense because of the technical knowledge which is now at the service of destructive forces, and because of the power to act on a gigantic and even global scale almost instantaneously. It is, however, giving rise to a stirring, moving the world in its depths, a reaction which is shaking people out of complacency and urging them to accept greater responsibility for the world.

Because of the direction which she took at Vatican II, the Church has a new involvement in the human issues of this developing

situation. The movement towards a new self-understanding, which was clear in the course of the council, emerged in *Gaudium et Spes* as the fulfilment of a three-fold mission: to proclaim in word and sacrament God's Kingdom in Jesus Christ; to offer an example of that Kingdom in the persons of her own members, transformed by Christ into a community of faith, hope, love, justice and truth; and to realize and extend the reign of God through service to the family of man. This mission takes up again the kerygma, koinonia and diakonia of the early Church, but applies them to proclamation, community-sign and service in today's world.

What does this mean for the religious woman? By her consecration, her role is to show within the Church the mother-love of God; but the context in which she must accept this role at present is one of change which affects the three main ecclesial aspects of her mission. With regard to the proclamation to the world of God's Kingdom in Jesus Christ, it is true that her consecration is of its nature directed in Christ to the whole world. It requires her to be a woman who listens to the Word of God, receives him in love and utters the Word for the sake of all men as our Lady did, and thus, in itself, has universal implications. As one foundress said, the apostolic religious woman should have a heart as wide as the world. For many reasons, however, the practical implications of this world-vision until fairly recently were often more notional than real. Present thinking in the Church gives them new urgency. The woman religious is asked to accept a personal responsibility to work towards the planetary conscience and global awareness stressed by the Synod of 1971, and to do so precisely as a woman consecrated to Christ in faith and love. Inevitably, her effort to express the goodness and motherly tenderness of God will take on the qualities of her own culture and circumstances. Therefore, it is important for her to try to think increasingly on a world scale to counteract an unconscious provincialism and discrimination. In this regard, she may be helped by the reflection that religious life for women is no longer the almost wholly western-culture phenomenon that it was, even a few generations ago. Nurtured for centuries in Europe and taken by european pioneers to the Americas in the seventeenth century, and to Asia, Australia, South Africa in the nineteenth, it has now had time to take root in the various cultures of the world and to be developing there according to local conditions. It is true that the majority of religious women are either of western origin or influenced by western culture; but of the 2365 superiors general who in 1972 formed the international union,

778 are now non-european. More importantly, the forms of religious life being developed in the Orient, in Africa and in Latin America are in function of cultural needs and circumstances. To try to think on a world scale is to be open to the various cultural expressions of the one religious consecration, and to welcome positively the richness of the holy Spirit reflected in the diversity. It is to be open, too, nearer home to the various types of person, products of a society in mutation, who may wish to come to religious life in a given country. Both inside and outside community, the religious woman in today's Church has to show the loving respect for and acceptance of the other which is her immediate contribution to world-understanding in Christ. International congregations and conferences, and those communities which have an international membership, are well placed with regard to this, as they have constantly to think in terms of a variety of backgrounds and so should be less likely to take a one-culture view of the Kingdom of God.

With regard to offering in her own person an example of the transformation in Christ which builds the Kingdom through a community of faith, hope, love, justice and truth, the religious woman today can be in a very favourable position. The acquisitiveness and possessiveness of consumer society, its tendency to judge persons by performance, productiveness or power, and its proneness to division and violence on both these counts, makes the lived witness of simplicity, loving respect, unity and peace particularly valuable and necessary. Religious women can give such witness. They are free for precisely that kind of apostolic simplicity of life which refuses to benefit at the expense of others and which can only be sustained through love of Christ in a gospel climate of mutual sharing and non-possessiveness. They are free also for a relation to and service of others that is not competitive or desirous of power. Their whole life, in its inner development and external dispositions alike, is meant to be directed towards a profound unity in Christ which points to the possibility of unity and peace among men. They can, in a real and effective sense, be people of justice, if they have the courage to face their calling honestly and act on what they see.

With regard to service in today's world, the religious woman whose consecration is expressed in apostolic service is finding that sharing Christ's mission means exploring new approaches. For many years the forms of service open to religious women were restricted by needs, resources and social convention alike. It is relatively recently that public authorities took responsibility for providing

what religious congregations had provided previously: schools, hospitals, guidance programmes, homes for the aged, care for children and young people. Public responsibility for such provision, far from being a threat to religious women, however, offers a great opportunity. It clarifies an important area of priorities in which there was sometimes confusion of thinking, because it makes clear that apostolic works are simply the expression of the religious woman's consecration to Christ. They are not identifiable with her vocation and religious commitment. Even in the case of congregations whose broad apostolate follows closely from their spirituality, the precise form of that apostolate in a given set of circumstances is usually accidental. Public responsibility is also valuable, in that it often frees the religious for more direct evangelical service. This is urgently needed at the present time. New congregations are taking up new apostolates and forms of ministry. Older congregations with longer established works are trying to rethink them in terms of justice, charity and the concrete circumstances of the present social change. In either case, many apostolates are under review.

Whatever may result from this, the orientation of the religious woman is towards the future. More than six years after *Perfectae Caritatis*, and after some painful and colourful experiences of serious renewal, her question is: given that religious life is an expression of the essence of the Church in its public and personal union with Christ in life-giving service, and given that today's world is what it is and its needs what they are, how can religious women called to an apostolic life deepen that union and improve that service so that they can better promote the building of Christ's Kingdom in this evolving world? Broadly speaking, they do it by directing all that they are and do to the preparing of Christ's coming now and always in faith, hope and love. This means that their first priority is Christ, who is bringing everything to fulfilment in himself, but who asks their collaboration as he once asked our Lady's, in order to do so. It means understanding the range, depth and priorities of religious consecration in such a way that religious women are not defined by what they do, because the relation of works to essentials is clear; nor are they defined by what they are accidentally, because even cultural accidents will be seen in their relativity. The definition of the religious woman will be by the quality of her consecrated relationship to Christ in and through the Church. Directing everything to the coming of Christ also means that women religious will need to understand the relationship of their consecration to mission,

and especially to participation in the one mission of Christ. They will need to see both consecration and mission concretely in terms of the needs, possibilities and resources of today and tomorrow, using the convergent freedoms of Vatican II, of present social change and their own growth in Christ, to find the forms of evangelical life and service that the situation calls for.

In their search, they will be encouraged by the sure and constant realities: God, Jesus Christ, the relation of the religious woman to him, the gospel, the sharing of Christ's mission in the world, the action of the holy Spirit, the fact of bringing all things to the fulness of Christ, the role of Mary, the development of religious life until this present time. They will be helped, too, by appreciating the changing elements in society, world understanding, the pace of life, the language of communication, standards and style of living, emphases and opportunities, expectations and attitudes, values. In short, their stability, balance and focus will be found in the transcendent realities of faith; their challenge in social realities and change; and their maturity in the christian love with which they handle the combination of both. The blending of these realities is exercising the Church today; and it is as a woman of the Church that the apostolic religious strives to unite them, whether in her individual life or in community.

Conclusion

Today's religious woman, then, needs to combine awareness of the long evolution which has brought her to the present point, with an understanding of the existential situation and an openness to the action of the holy Spirit which will take her beyond it. She is called to be in terms of the 'seventies a microcosm of the Church in the consecration of all that is feminine, a continuing expression of that mystery of the Church in Mary which itself reflects the strength and beauty of the mother-element in God. She will help towards the transformation of the world in Christ, to the extent to which she lives out this calling; for, though substitutes can be found for any of the services she renders, it is her consecrated life in Christ which is the leaven of transformation, and for this there is no replacement. If the action of Christ flows through her, whatever its outward expression, her role in the Church is realised. In a mysterious way she will come to express something of the 'eternal feminine': the Church, the bride of Christ; Mary the virgin, mother of all human kind.