

BETWEEN HEAVEN AND EARTH

The Call to Religious Life

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IN TWO ARTICLES, published in July 2021 in *Thinking Faith*, Cardinal Michael Czerny reflects on *Fratelli tutti*, with its invitation to all people of good will to ‘contribute to the rebirth of a universal aspiration to fraternity’ (n.8).¹ Although Pope Francis does not refer specifically to religious life in this encyclical, Czerny sees that invitation as having a special significance for religious, given their distinctive ability ‘to foster a sense of belonging ... and create bonds of integration between different generations and different communities’ (n.53). In most religious congregations a plurality of cultures and generations already exists, so they could be seen to embody the ‘universal aspiration to fraternity’ of which Francis speaks here.²

Analysing some of the challenges facing religious life in today’s world through the lens of *Fratelli tutti*, Czerny draws attention to the teaching of Vatican II and other church documents, holding that the vision and spirit of religious life predispose those following this vocation to be ‘witnesses and architects of ... unity’.³ Religious communities, he suggests, by sharing faith together and in the quality of their life in common, create sacred spaces of encounter, kindness and dialogue in the midst of the culture of ‘limitless consumption and empty individualism’ (n.13) so evident in the globalised world of our times. Those called to this life live in ‘a community composed of brothers and sisters who accept and care for one another’ (n.96) and, living in this way, the members ‘make possible a social friendship that excludes no one and a fraternity that is open to all’ (n.94).

¹ Michael Czerny, ‘The Renewal of Religious Life and *Fratelli tutti*’, *Thinking Faith* (20 June 2021), at <https://www.thinkingfaith.org/articles/renewal-religious-life-and-fratelli-tutti>; ‘The Renewal of Religious Life and *Fratelli tutti*: Reading *Fratelli tutti* for Religious’, *Thinking Faith* (23 June 2021), at <https://www.thinkingfaith.org/articles/renewal-religious-life-and-fratelli-tutti-reading-fratelli-tutti-religious>.

² I appreciate *Fratelli tutti* very much, but regret that the English translation appears to ignore the importance of inclusive language for many English-speakers today.

³ Sacred Congregation for Religious and for Secular Institutes, *Religious and Human Promotion*, n. 24, quoted in John Paul II, *Vita consecrata*, n. 46.

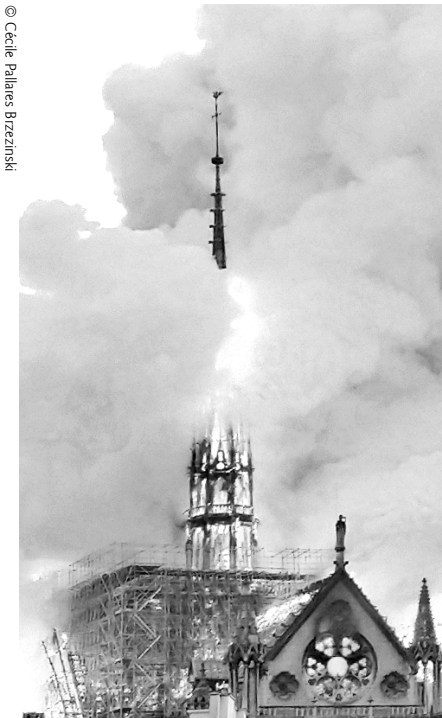
Czerny interprets the challenges facing religious life today as ‘signs of the times’, and encourages religious not to allow themselves to be overwhelmed by the difficulties, but to recommit themselves to the *sequela Christi*. ‘The reality of consecrated life as a sign’, he says, ‘finds in brother- and sister-hood the prophetic anticipation of a world in which unity is achieved while safeguarding differences, variety and mutual respect’.⁴ Following Czerny’s lead, and giving due attention to the insights of *Fratelli tutti*, I suggest that religious life, a gift of the Holy Spirit, has a particular relevance in the Church and world of the third millennium. Stretched as it were between heaven and earth, religious men and women pray, struggle and walk with the Church and with humanity, seeking God’s kindly light on the journey of faith and life.

Sign and Symbol

In Holy Week 2019, I was living in Paris. For my little community of Faithful Companions of Jesus, that week began in Notre Dame Cathedral, as we listened to the last of the Lent Conferences, televised live on

Palm Sunday. The very next day, 15 April, we were glued to the television all evening, watching in horror as sheets of flame swept through the ancient building. Along with the rest of Paris, indeed with the rest of the world, we felt utterly devastated and, like so many people, experienced a feeling of almost personal loss.

It was with relief we heard that the fire crews, by their hard work and expertise, had saved the familiar façade, external walls and towers of the medieval cathedral, along with its renowned stained-glass windows. But the slender, graceful spire that had crowned the central section of the roof above the main nave was lost. We saw it fall: carved



⁴ Czerny, ‘The Renewal of Religious Life and *Fratelli tutti*: Reading *Fratelli tutti* for Religious’.

in oak and covered with lead, it had melted, incinerated in the terrifying conflagration. That spire—the word in French is *flèche*, which means *arrow*—had a symbolic role: to point to the heavens. For me, a spire is a powerful symbol of the call to religious life; but it is an eminently Christian symbol, its meaning perceptible to Christian eyes. Does this symbol hold any relevance in an increasingly dechristianized Western world?

In the context of faith, symbols belong to the domain of the sacred; they draw our attention to spiritual realities. Religious life is not part of the institutional structures of the Church but belongs to its charismatic essence, finding its deepest meaning in the realm of sacred signs and symbols. In a certain sense, religious are ‘sacraments’ of God’s presence in the world: their life signifies a reality beyond itself, the Kingdom of God. For those with eyes to see, their life points to God’s presence in our world, in our universe, bridging what is often perceived as the gap between the sacred and the secular.

By its radical commitment to the values of the gospel of Jesus Christ, religious life acknowledges both God’s transcendence and God’s presence within time through faith and hope and love. Religious life is grounded in a vision of the whole of existence as graced by God, imbued with God’s threefold presence: God beyond us, God with us and God within us. Religious remind humanity of what we can be, of what we must be, of what deep down, in our hearts, we most want to be, and this awareness grows when God’s central role in all life is acknowledged, respected and accepted.

In the face of the ‘distancing from religious values and the prevailing individualism accompanied by materialistic philosophies’ (*Fratelli tutti*, n. 175) that is so evident in our times, religious—by their lives, by their ministries, by their prayers and attentiveness to God’s presence—invite and encourage those they meet to face the adventure of life knowing we are all held in the hands of God’s mercy and love. God—beauty, truth, goodness—draws them onward. They listen to ‘the music of the Gospel ... hear the strains that challenge us to defend the dignity of every man and woman For us the wellspring of human dignity and fraternity is in the Gospel of Jesus Christ.’ (n. 277)

Vincent van Gogh once said that the word ‘artist’ means: ‘I am seeking, I am striving, I am in it with all my heart’.⁵ Perhaps religious

⁵ Vincent van Gogh to Theo van Gogh, May 1882, in *The Letters of Vincent Van Gogh*, edited by Mark Roskill (New York: Touchstone, 1997), 148.

men and women are ‘artists’ in this sense. They have a wholehearted desire to respond to God’s call through a primary life commitment that is both exclusive and enduring. Why would anyone wish to live such a life? Joan Chittister OSB offers an answer that has much in common with van Gogh’s:

Women and men give their very selves to it, whole and entire, day in day out, all the days of their lives, with nothing else to strive for, no place to call home, no one else with whom to share their lives. The question is: Why? The answer is: in order to be in the world a kind of contemplative presence that manifests, that requires the Reign of God, to be some part of bringing the world to the kind of creation God wants it to be. The identity of the group, in other words, is social and institutional as well as personal.⁶

Scriptural Calls

The calls of Abram, Moses, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Gideon, Mary, Peter, Mary of Magdala and Paul offer a scriptural pattern in which the dynamic of the religious vocation is evident: a personal encounter with God; a personal invitation, on God’s initiative, to undertake a mission; an awareness of unworthiness; a conversion experience; a free and wholehearted acceptance of God’s invitation: *Here I am, send me*. Ask any religious—you will find that, like those whose response to God’s call is recorded in the pages of the Bible, the starting point of their call to religious life is a profound, never-to-be-forgotten experience of God.

Religious women and men recognise and acknowledge God dwelling at the heart of existence, a God with a human face who communicates with us personally in a relationship of love. Those who respond to ‘a religious vocation’ place God and the things of God at the centre of their lives and, in doing so, radicalise the experience of all Christians. This is not because they see themselves as good and virtuous individuals living among sinners, or as offering heroic models to lesser mortals—their desire is simply to pass on the touch of God to those they meet. They consciously write the story of their lives in God’s presence, with God’s eyes upon them: ‘O Lord, you are the centre of my life: I will always praise you, I will always serve you, I will always keep you in my sight’.⁷

⁶ Joan Chittister, *The Fire in These Ashes: A Spirituality of Contemporary Religious Life* (Franklin: Sheed and Ward, 1995), 15–16.

⁷ Refrain of Paul Inwood’s musical setting of Psalm 16.

Religious keep God in their sight, proclaiming the Good News of Jesus Christ by who they are and what they do. Seeking dialogue with those they meet and establishing bonds of companionship with them (see *Fratelli tutti*, n.271) are essential parts of their lives. And they do these things as disciples of Jesus who, in his life on earth, created a life-giving culture by defying inequality, scorning hypocrisy, naming the truth and spreading peace. Jesus valued friendship, was gently compassionate, loved the unloved, healed the sick and welcomed strangers. Religious try to do the same.

A Prophetic Vocation in the Church

The Church is a sign of what God has done in Christ, of God's abiding presence in the world through the action of the Holy Spirit. Religious life is a radical sharing in the mission of the Church, in which the Kingdom of God and its priorities are raised above other considerations.

Religious men and women are called to holiness, to intimacy with God in the service of God's people; and baptism, the context of all Christian living, is the foundation of their way of life: 'In the Church's tradition religious profession is considered to be a special and fruitful deepening of the consecration received in Baptism'.⁸ The Church is the community where the redemptive work of Jesus has been recognised, received and proclaimed, and where this work continues.

A radical sharing in the mission of the Church

Religious life offers a kind of counter-culture, not by being negatively critical in the face of the complexity of human life, but by proposing an alternative way of living. Its members share the one mission: to announce the Good News, to be a sign and instrument of communion with God through Christ. The theological focus of this mission is twofold: transcendence, recognising God as 'other', as 'mystery'; and engaging with God's world, reaching out to God in creation and in human experience. Religious are on mission when their life (who they are) and action (what they do) prophetically point to, promote and make visible the Kingdom of God. They live intentionally in the light of faith, and their faith is strengthened by prayer, by the liturgy and sacraments of the Church, the people of God.

⁸ John Paul II, *Vita consecrata*, n. 30.

The Vows—Sign of Lifelong Consecration

Religious life has a mystical core, and those who follow the call to this life attempt to create a 'different' world, a way of living that is based on a faith response to God. They do this through the vowed life, which gradually developed into a distinctive form of life in the Church. Religious make three vows—poverty, chastity and obedience—professing them publicly and choosing to make them a framework for living. They do this with the intention of living their vows 'for ever'. All three vows, inspired as they are by the life and teaching of Jesus, are also known as 'evangelical counsels', and they characterize the self-giving of the person to God, translating into human terms the totality and deeply rooted nature of the gift. Poverty is understood as an expression of the person's radical dependence on God; chastity represents the primacy of the love of God in his or her life; while obedience symbolizes the desire to imitate the self-emptying of Christ by seeking God's will in this world.

Religious are consecrated in the name of God and dedicate themselves to God's mission. At their profession, they publicly undertake to live in a way which radicalises the common experience of all Christians. They are 'set apart' for God, permeated by their desire to walk in God's presence, trying to make the world more deeply human and more open to God. Being 'set apart' in this way does not mean living on a higher plane or disregarding earthly realities; it means accepting the call to be sent in God's name to proclaim the Good News of salvation.

Religious women and men, through their consecration to God, forge new relationships with things and people, with human society, with creation. Mindful of the presence of God in the grandeur and misery of human existence, they respond with gratitude to the beauty of life and with courage in the inevitable times of suffering and grief. Compassion for those in any kind of need links religious life to the good of society, but the commitment of religious to the deprived and the disadvantaged is not simply dedicated social work. For religious, the work of caring for the poor, feeding the hungry, tending the sick, educating the young, welcoming the stranger, visiting the prisoner, has the special motivation of walking in the footsteps of Jesus, of following him, even to the foot of the cross. They have a 'shared passion to create a community of belonging and solidarity worthy of our time, our energy and our resources' (*Fratelli tutti*, n. 36).

God-Centred Communities

Religious communities are intentionally God-centred. They witness to religious and spiritual values in an increasingly secularised environment. Living like everyone else in the tangible, material world, they unashamedly acknowledge the importance of the transcendent. Committed to an ever-deepening relationship with God in Christ, they desire to be signs and bearers of God's love to the whole human family, knowing that we need to 'learn to live together in harmony and peace, without all of us having to be the same' (*Fratelli tutti*, n.100).

Contemplation is the energy of their life, the core of their identity. Their role is to bring to visibility what is Good News for the present time, not only by reaching out to unbelievers but, above all, by witnessing to the values of the Kingdom of God: respect for the whole of creation; encouraging the growth of free and integrated persons; building channels of communion and solidarity with all people by moving beyond prejudices and misconceptions. Religious communities are open to visitations of grace. Sensitive to God's unfailing presence in the whole of life, for them, 'The world is charged with the grandeur of God/It will flame out, like shining from shook foil ...'⁹ They believe that God's providence is secretly shaping and guiding our lives, and this, as Pope Francis says, brings joy: 'Wherever there are religious, there is joy'.¹⁰

Religious women and men, longing for justice and peace, cannot be true to their calling without a preferential option for those who are poor. The action taken by religious on behalf of



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⁹ Gerard Manley Hopkins, 'God's Grandeur', in *The Poetical Works of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, edited by Norman H. MacKenzie (Oxford: Clarendon, 1990), 139.

¹⁰ Pope Francis, letter 'To All Consecrated People on the Occasion of the Year of Consecrated Life', n. 1.

those in any kind of need measures and demonstrates the integrity of their contemplation. This option is a spiritual choice made in imitation of Jesus, who recognised the human dignity of poor and suffering people, of prisoners, and of those who were excluded from the social order of his time. For religious, this means not only desiring to lead a simple life, not only caring for the poor out of compassion, but also, through their distinctive commitment and mission, responding with what Pope Francis calls ‘a new vision of fraternity and social friendship’ (*Fratelli tutti*, n.6).

Religious Life Today

In times past, it was customary to think of God as immutable and many found this thought comforting and reassuring: ‘Change and decay in all around I see,/O Thou who changest not, abide with me’. Perhaps we are beginning to change this theological tune. The insight of faith is that we belong to something—Someone—greater than ourselves: God, whose presence, in moments of contemplative awareness, may be perceived in our lives, in creation. But the signs of that presence are not immutable—God has many names, and a ‘new’ face of God reveals itself in all the ups and downs of human existence.

In every age, religious life has been the seedbed of evangelical innovation, meeting new needs in new ways while integrating the tried and true wisdom of the past. In our day, there are indications that the paradigm of religious life seen as a ‘total institution’ is giving way to more of a flexible, deregulated expression of this form of life. In the face of this, religious today find themselves in the midst of a crisis of recruitment and, with an ageing membership, they have been forced to close many of their traditional establishments.

As they explore new patterns of evolutionary thinking, it may be possible for them to reach a clearer view of some of the paths religious life may take in the future. Whatever they do, they need to have the courage to acknowledge that, if there is one thing sure about the current state of religious life, it is that ‘what is’ is not sustainable. ‘Everything, then, depends on our ability to see the need for a change of heart, attitudes and lifestyles’ (*Fratelli tutti*, n.166). Those entering religious communities today need to be prepared not so much for what is, as for what will be. If religious life is to survive and flourish, religious need to focus on the fundamentals of living a God-centred life in today’s world, setting aside what is peripheral or superfluous, including certain

traditional devotions, ministries and ways of proceeding. Elizabeth Johnson says it well: ‘The living God who spans all time relates to historically new circumstances as the future continuously arrives. A tradition that cannot change cannot be preserved.’¹¹

Looking to the Future

Karl Rahner, referring to religious life, once wrote: ‘We have to make experiments, have the courage to change ourselves, to see and seize on new tasks and to give up old ones, to march into a future unknown to us’.¹² Religious life is not a monolithic institution; like the Church itself, it is and must always be responsive to what Vatican II called ‘the signs of the times’. Therefore, since the way this life is lived is not unchanging, we must listen for the call of God in the present, in the world of the third millennium.¹³

Where is God opening a door for religious life now? Today, many religious are looking for authentic ways to continue to live a faith-centred life in a secularised world where humanism has largely become the accepted atmosphere and the renunciation that is integral to the vowed life is viewed with suspicion or scepticism. They are in the process of discerning how to adapt their way of living in the light of contemporary needs, while not losing sight of traditional ideals. Reflecting constantly on how their lifestyle decisions affect the earth and the poorest people of the earth, they are reviewing their ministries. Whenever and wherever possible, they are joining in positive action to bring about change in the face of the environmental emergency which is affecting the whole planet.

They value the fundamental, time-honoured elements of religious life—simple, sustainable living in community, daily prayer, celebrating the eucharist, spiritual reading, study and regular retreats. At the same time, through their varied ministries, they look to widen their circle of love in order to embrace all people, especially those who

¹¹ Elizabeth Johnson, *Quest for the Living God* (London: Continuum, 2007), 23.

¹² Karl Rahner, *Opportunities for Faith: Elements of a Modern Spirituality*, translated by Edward Quinn (New York: Seabury, 1975), 87.

¹³ Jane Herb, president of the American Leadership of Women Religious, in her address to the 2022 Assembly, put it this way: ‘... it seems we are leaning into the future of religious life, not simply the survival of our own congregations Something is coming to an end, and we do not know what is emerging.’ (‘Embracing a Traveler’s Heart: Mapping Our Journey’, available at https://lcwr.org/files/pdf/2022_lcwr_assembly_presidential_address_-_jane_herb_ihm.pdf, accessed 19 September 2022.)

experience exclusion, exploitation and injustice. In a spirit of hope, they place their future in God's hands. Theirs is 'a home with open doors' (*Fratelli tutti*, n.276).

I began by drawing attention to the symbolic spire of Notre Dame, destroyed in April 2019 in that terrible fire. I would like to conclude by referring to Shelley's 'Ode to a Skylark', in which I see an evocative symbol of religious life today. The poet hailed this bird as a 'blithe spirit' which pours out its heart's song 'from heaven or near it'.¹⁴ Smallish, brown, unostentatious, the skylark is drawn inexorably to the heights: it can ascend to 1,000 feet, and there it hovers, singing its joyful song. Because it nests on the ground, this little bird is vulnerable. In our time, it also suffers from the effects of climate change, and in some parts of the world the whole species is endangered. My prayer is that the skylark will continue to hover between earth and heaven, singing its incomparable song: may the ears of present and future generations not be deaf to its call.

A final word from Timothy Radcliffe OP:

It may happen that, in spite of all that we do, our congregations still shrink. That makes the witness of the remnant all the more beautiful and necessary. So, especially when we are few, our presence shows that we do not think of ourselves as a failing business, but as a fragile but lovely sign of the future unity of all humanity in the Kingdom.¹⁵

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¹⁴ Percy Bysshe Shelley, 'Ode to a Skylark', in *The Complete Poetical Works*, edited by Thomas Hutchinson (Oxford: OUP, 1914), 596–597.

¹⁵ 'Priest with Confidence in a Very Modest God', interview with Timothy Radcliffe by Madeleine Davies, *Church Times* (20 December 2019). Timothy was talking here about the declining membership of many Christian Churches, but his words ring true for religious life also.