

FORMATION FOR NEW FORMS OF RELIGIOUS COMMUNITY LIFE

By SANDRA M. SCHNEIDERS

ANYONE attending to the emerging patterns in religious life today is aware that increasing numbers of religious, especially women, no longer live in 'traditional' religious communities, i.e., in large groups composed exclusively of members of their own congregation living together under the same roof. The least startling modification is so-called 'small community living' which has all the characteristics just mentioned except that, instead of being composed of twenty or more religious, the group is composed of three to five. Beyond this modification, which was considered radical a few years ago, are such variations as intercongregational living (members of more than one congregation living together), mixed community (religious and laity, of the same or both sexes, living together), and religious 'living alone'.

For some people this list represents a scale from 'normal' to 'highly irregular' and their anxiety increases as they approach the 'living alone' end of the scale. The thesis of this article is twofold: first, that both the negative evaluation of these developments in community living and the alarm with which some people view them should be questioned; second, that a major task of formation today is preparing religious to live in a variety of types of community situations, both group and single over the course of their lives. I will use the word *community* to refer to the entire reality of congregational belonging and participation (not to collective living) and *lifestyle* to refer to the particular type of living arrangement within which that participation takes place (e.g., living singly, in a large or small group, intercongregationally, in a mixed group, etc.).

If current patterns of development continue (and it seems likely that they will) religious will increasingly not live the traditional community lifestyle, despite steady pressure from the hierarchy to do so. It would seem that there are at least two reasons for this.

read more at www.theway.org.uk

The first reason is *ministerial*. As numbers of members decline religious congregations will own and operate fewer large institutions such as schools and hospitals in which many members of the same congregation will work together. At the same time, financial needs of congregations will necessitate religious working in remunerative ministries. Thus, religious will be called to a diversity of ministries outside congregationally owned institutions and often they will be the only member of their congregation who has the interest and/or the necessary preparation and credentials for that particular ministry. In short, deinstitutionalization of ministries will place religious in different life and work situations which will necessitate new lifestyles.

The second reason is *psychological-spiritual*. As religious become more aware of the uniqueness of personality and of the different needs an individual has at various stages of human growth and spiritual development, they are less hesitant to recognize that lifestyle is an important factor in mental and spiritual health. They are more likely, therefore, to question the assumption that a single lifestyle is always the best for all members of a congregation over an entire lifetime. In other words, increasing numbers of religious have good personal and spiritual reasons for choosing lifestyles other than the traditional one, at least at certain periods of their lives, and they will increasingly insist that those choices be honoured.

Analyzing the anxiety

Many religious, especially congregational leaders, are uncomfortable, even alarmed, in the face of these developments. They spontaneously feel that there is something at least anomalous and probably dangerous about a religious living anything but the traditional lifestyle. Language itself reveals this anxiety. They speak of such religious as 'detached members', or describe them as living 'out of community'. The assumption seems to be that this situation is abnormal and that its termination is devoutly to be desired.

It would seem that at the base of this anxiety lies the conviction that *community*, which is indeed integral to Christian and religious existence, is synonymous with *common life* which is defined as *living under the same roof* with members of the same congregation. This position is thought to be a theological given. Community, so understood, is therefore a non-negotiable 'essential element' of

religious life as such.¹ I will try to suggest below that this understanding of community may be, if not actually faulty, at least not the only tenable position.

Furthermore, some congregational leaders seem to suspect that the only real reason a religious would choose to live otherwise than in a traditional group setting (except for educational purposes) is that she or he is either 'on the way out', a 'problem case' who cannot fit in, or involved in some nefarious enterprise or relationship. This is probably no more justified than the assumption that all religious who live in traditional groups are dependent personalities seeking anonymity and security in numbers. Without doubt both these assumptions prove true in relation to some religious, but there is no justification for the generalization of either. Just as we must carefully discern a person's motives for wanting to join a community group we must discern a person's motives for choosing some other lifestyle.

Obviously, the fact that there is no provision in canon law for a variety of lifestyles for religious² suggests that the traditional group lifestyle is not only normative but mandatory. The law certainly accurately reflects the fact that for many centuries most religious have lived this way. It also, in all probability, reflects the sometimes obsessive concern of Church authority with centralized authority and control, especially male control of women. People who dress alike, live in easily identifiable groups, and are immediately subject to a single superior are easier to control than those who are more integrated into society and exercise a measure of personal autonomy. Both the normativity of traditional community lifestyle and the political agenda of ecclesiastical control need to be examined in the light of the discerned experience of mature religious.

Historical and linguistic revisioning

If we are to rethink the issue of religious community lifestyle in the light of contemporary experience (something which is absolutely necessary if we are to avoid destructive polarization within congregations and create realistic formation programmes for the next generation of religious) it is necessary to be explicit about the assumptions just described and to evaluate them critically. In other words, the entire mindset within which these assumptions mutually reinforce one another and create the impression that community has always been and must always be understood and lived in only one way, needs to be provisionally

suspended so that we can ask the pertinent questions suggested by our own historical setting and experience. A sort of conditional 'clearing of the mental decks' will allow us to look at the facts and possibilities with clearer vision.

First, it is important to attend to the fact that religious *have not always lived* according to what we think of as the traditional community lifestyle. The virgins of the first centuries apparently lived in their own homes; most of the men and women monks who went to the desert in the fourth century lived as hermits; the Beguines of the thirteenth century lived in individual dwellings within a compound; many male missionaries and even some female missionaries in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries journeyed alone and sometimes worked alone in isolated ministerial settings; religious in the past and in our own day who have been forced underground by repressive political regimes have lived incognito in society; and some recently founded communities, even those which recognize community formation as central to their charism, have not chosen the traditional community lifestyle.³

In short, history suggests that religious community life does not, of its nature, demand a particular lifestyle. Single person, small group, intercongregational, mixed and large group lifestyles have at various times in history characterized different religious communities. What may be original about our own time is that different members of the same congregation may be living differently at the same time, and the same person may successively live a variety of lifestyles because of changes in ministry or personal developments.

Secondly, we probably need to do a serious study of the *sociological situation* of religious communities today in relation to the conditions in which the traditional lifestyle developed. While such an analysis is completely beyond the scope of this article, let me at least suggest that the large group community lifestyle we think of as traditional developed in the medieval agrarian, feudal and urban social settings in which the only way to survive was to live in large social units which were, in effect, extended families. Furthermore, women's religious life extended to reflect the inconceivability of a respectable woman's living alone in an urban setting. Such a lifestyle would have been unimaginable for most women even in industrialized western countries a couple of decades ago.

In other words, the traditional community lifestyle may owe more to the assimilation by religious of the forms of social organization characteristic of the societies in which they arose than to theological reflection on the nature or demands of religious life as such. Without doubt, the form of life adopted was heavily theologized, just as the monarchical form of ecclesiastical organization has been, but theological reflection on what exists is not the same as theological justification for its unchangeableness.

A further question is raised by the realization that the quasi-extended family, which served as the sociological model for traditional religious lifestyle, was a relatively self-sufficient socio-economic unit. The feudal fief, the medieval guild, the family farm of early America provided for or directly guaranteed all the basic necessities of the group. Food was produced and prepared, clothing was made, housing was constructed, education was imparted, prayer was facilitated, recreation was shared, marriages were arranged, children were raised within the social network of the medieval 'family' unit. Until quite recently religious communities were analogous to such extended families in their self-sufficiency.

Today, most people in the western world belong to a nuclear family (with which they may or may not actually live) which serves, ideally, as the affective and value base from which its members venture out to satisfy their basic needs through interaction with a wide variety of external agencies: restaurants, schools, recreation complexes, medical facilities, churches, shops, government and especially the workplace.⁴ It is at least legitimate to ask whether modern religious can, without strain, live in a social system which is foreign to their experience in growing up and which has little congruence with the social structures of the society with which they interact during most of their waking life.

I am not suggesting that religious should simply mimic the society around them. But like the Church which has finally come to realize that it is not a parallel system to the world, a 'perfect society' running on a separate track, but a special part of the world,⁵ religious must deal realistically with the fact that they live, socially, within and as part of the modern world. If it does not make sense to dress like seventeenth-century peasants in twentieth-century New York, it may not make sense to live like sixth-century farmers in twentieth-century London.

Thirdly, if we are to re-examine our notions of religious community it may be necessary to *revise our language*. Language is a

powerful conveyor not just of explicit information but of rich complexes of meaning and value. I would like to suggest that our discussion of community would progress with less heat and more light if we could agree to use value-neutral terms for realities whose value is not intrinsic to them but determined by context. Specifically, I suggest that we cease using the terms 'living in community' and 'living alone' (which are respectively positive and negative in value) as designations or descriptions of *lifestyle* and speak instead of 'living in a group' and 'living singly'. It is a well known fact that there are religious who, in terms of lifestyle, live in a group but who, psychologically and spiritually, are living alone because they are isolated and non-participant. Likewise, as many congregational leaders have testified, there are religious who, in terms of lifestyle, live singly, but who are living fully in community because of the intensity of their felt belonging and participation in the life of the congregation.

The real issue: community

The challenging issue for contemporary religious communities is not lifestyle, i.e., whether religious live in large groups, small groups, mixed groups, intercongregationally or singly. It is community, the psycho-socio-spiritual unity of minds and hearts in Christ which is theologically essential to Christian life as such and to which religious life is explicitly committed to bear a particular witness. By focussing on the real issue, namely community, we can perhaps discern more clearly what formation for contemporary community and preparation for diverse lifestyles require.

I would like to suggest that community has at least four dimensions into which the beginning religious must grow if she or he is to realize fully the vocation to religious life. First, community is a *theological* reality. Religious embody and witness to a dimension of the universal Christian call to unity in Christ which is special (though not unique) to them, namely, the transcendent quality of Christian community as eschatological reality. Christians, by baptism, are called to a universal oneness which transcends by its inclusiveness the ties of blood, economic interest, political power, racial and ethnic affinity and finally even religious diversity. Jesus is Saviour of the world (cf Jn 4,42) and the Church must incarnate that universal mission in her life and ministry.

Religious, by their choice of celibacy, decide against the concentration of their community-realizing efforts in a single family and

join communities which have no biological, national, ethnic, racial, political or economic entrance requirements. They commit themselves to a unity which has no natural 'glue', if you will, in order to witness to the possibility and reality of that transcendent unity which Christ's blood shed on Calvary makes possible.

Secondly, religious community is a *spiritual* reality integral to the faith experience of its members. This dimension of community is much harder to describe than the theological but its reality is very tangible. Perhaps it is best understood in terms of the experience of 'belonging'. Integral to the identity, exercise of ministry, prayer and personal choices of the religious is his or her belonging to a particular religious congregation. One is not just a member of the Dominican order. One *is* a Dominican.

What that means is difficult to define but if community identity does not deeply colour a religious's sense of self before God and the world, the person does not really belong spiritually to the community regardless of her or his lifestyle. As religious live in more geographically scattered and socially enmeshed patterns, the issue of belonging will necessarily become more acute. The community will no longer carry the religious; it is the religious who must carry the community into every experience, social setting, relationship and commitment of her or his life.

Thirdly, community is a *ministerial* reality. The issue at this level is corporateness, the unity in diversity of the congregation's mission and ministries. Religious in ministry are not solitary agents. In times past, when all the members of the community worked in congregational institutions and with other members of their own institute, there was little felt need to distinguish between corporate mission and collective activity. Today, the members of a congregation may be doing a wide variety of works, some of which may not be explicitly Church-related. Many of the members may be working exclusively with people who are not part of the congregation or even part of the Church. This raises the serious question of how the ministries of the members are unified in the mission of the congregation and, therefore, how the ministries of the members are related among themselves.

Corporate mission and related ministries cannot mean that everyone in the congregation does the same work or that one person decides what each member will do. Nor can it be achieved by such formalities as the technical assigning of members to their respective ministries at the beginning of the year (although this

need not be a pure formality and may serve other important functions). Communities will have to struggle to discern and articulate the profound unity of their mission, the relationships of their ministries, the limits of diversity that they can realistically sustain (and the more mature the community the wider these limits can be), and how their corporateness can be maintained, witnessed in the Church, celebrated at home and communicated to new members.

Finally, community is a *psychological and social*, that is, an affective reality. Religious willingly forego the personal support and the resources for growth of a normal primary family. If they are not to compensate for this sacrifice in unhealthy ways or seek the satisfaction of their legitimate human needs through the manipulation of others, they must be able to find in their communities a reasonable response to healthy requirements for personal acceptance, encouragement in prayer and ministry, affirmation in success, support in failure. They should be able to expect and to accept constructive challenge when this is necessary and assistance in time of need.⁶

In short, belonging to a community is not merely a title to one's share of corporate goods but a claim on the care of those with whom one has cast one's lot for life. How this mutual caring can be actualized among members who are geographically dispersed and ministerially diverse is a challenge for today's religious communities. However, building affective community today may not be any more difficult than it was in previous times when members lived physically close to each other but were estranged by anti-intimacy rules and unresolved conflicts which festered for years because they could not be honestly admitted and resolved.

Formation for community

Community members in formation today may, in the course of their religious lives, live in a wide variety of community lifestyles. No doubt at the beginning most will live in large or small groups composed of members of their own congregations. As they leave initial formation and enter programmes of advanced study or take up individual ministries in professional settings, they may well find themselves living intercongregationally, in mixed groups or singly. Therefore, preparation for community life which proceeds on the assumption that those in formation will, barring unusual

circumstances, spend their adult religious lives in congregational houses is inadequate preparation.

New members in religious institutes must, before all else, be interiorly formed for community life in all its theological, spiritual, ministerial and affective density. But obviously, it is also important to prepare them, insofar as that is possible in view of the rapidly changing social world in which we live, for the variety of lifestyles in which they may eventually participate.

At this point in time, we do not have ready made models of how to prepare new religious for this variety of lifestyles. Fortunately, because many candidates today enter with considerable experience of living singly, in primary families, and in voluntary communities before entrance, there may be much of a practical nature which does not have to be taught. Many candidates today enter knowing how to drive a car, balance a cheque book, handle a credit card, shop, cook, do the laundry, register to vote, order in a restaurant, pay the rent and dress appropriately for work and play. If they (and this is equally important for men and women) do not have these basic skills for survival in the real world, acquiring them may be the modern equivalent of learning to buff corridors and eat fruit with a knife and fork. It is important that beginning religious do not lose these survival skills during formation, since it is unlikely that anyone entering religious life today will be able, over a lifetime, to seek refuge in collective living from the ordinary responsibilities of adult life.

Learning to live independently in the real world, however, is the least difficult aspect of preparing for community life. I would suggest that there are at least four essential dimensions to formation for community living within a variety of lifestyles in our times. They are closely related to the dimensions of community discussed above but in what follows I want to concentrate on the practical issue of the content of formation.

The first practical task is *affective* formation. New members have to learn to love their community because unless they belong affectively no amount of forced togetherness will get them 'into community'. This may well be one of the most important reasons for devoting quality time to the study of community history, the celebration of community feasts, caring for and recreating with older community members, participating actively in congregational procedures and assemblies, learning about the ministries of professed members by visiting them in the mission field, developing a

healthy pride in the congregation's achievements and sharing faith and fun with one another. People learn to love by being loved; by getting to know those who love them; by having the chance to express their love and having those expressions recognized and treasured. New members deeply want to belong. If they do not become affectively integrated, questions need to be raised either about their real call to this community or about the adequacy of the formation programme.

A second dimension of formation for community is the *religious-theological* dimension. Religious need deep motivation for living community over the long haul, especially as they experience a variety of lifestyles beyond the somewhat rarefied atmosphere of initial formation. As in any marriage, once the honeymoon stage of the relationship is over, the differences surface and the struggles begin. But, unlike marriage partners, members of a religious community do not have the same intensely interpersonal agenda nor the bond and responsibility of children to motivate the struggle for fidelity and perseverance. The only finally sustaining motivation for the attempt to live religious community over a lifetime is the theological sense that bearing witness to the transcendent quality of eschatological community in Christ makes. In other words, community has to be an object of serious study and the subject of profound prayer if it is to be interiorized as a principal value of religious life for which one is prepared to make real sacrifices over the course of a lifetime. 'Living alone', i.e., in isolation from community, whether one lives in a group or singly, is the expression of the failure of this value in the life of a religious.

Thirdly, formation for community is a *spiritual-ascetical* enterprise. However motivated one might be to incarnate the value of eschatological community in one's life, this cannot be done in the abstract because community does not exist in the abstract. Only concrete, specific communities exist. One way of talking about the specificity of communities today is to speak of the congregation's charism. In former times we talked about its spirit. Through formation new members imbibe the characteristic ethos and spiritual genius of their own community. Later, if they should be living singly or in an intercongregational group, they may be the sole bearer of that spirit in their ministerial or living situation. If the spirit of their own community dies in them, not only will they be unable to bring their congregational charism as gift to their companions in ministry, but their own inner sense of community

belonging dies. There is no such thing as belonging to community 'in general'.

The charism or spirit of the congregation is probably not something that can be taught in a formation classroom. It has to be caught, sensed, breathed in through community participation. This is not a matter of mere socialization into a collective. The charism is the special 'take' on the gospel which gives the community its spiritual personality, and so new members have to discover experientially and prayerfully interiorize this spirit if they are to live community in a more than sociological sense.

However it is not sufficient to have interiorized the charism of one's community to live it out over the long haul. Community living is difficult. It is difficult for those who live in a group and must put up with the daily small annoyances and occasional major conflicts which close living necessarily involves. It is difficult for people living intercongregationally or singly who cannot turn easily to companions who share their congregational history and spirit for support in the difficulties of community life. Living community requires its own form of *asceticism* and that asceticism must be, at least in its beginnings, acquired in formation.

The development of a practical asceticism for community life, it would seem, should be based on the assumption that most members will live community in a variety of lifestyles in the course of their active careers and that the same will be true of their brothers or sisters in the community. In other words, it has to be assumed that members will be geographically scattered, diversely employed and involved in a variety of groups and pursuits besides those originating in the congregation. What does it mean to be a responsible, participating member of a community under such circumstances?

No doubt any religious with much experience could supply a description of the asceticism involved. First might be the *development of those interpersonal and group skills* which enable one to participate effectively in collegial government. To accept responsibility for community involves contributing to the development of policy as well as responsibly carrying out decisions. Effective group participation is a learned skill and using that skill is often a patience-taxing effort.

Secondly, it is important that new religious develop *habits of maintaining community contacts* through mail, phone, taking advantage of proximity, making time for contacts when fellow religious are

in the area, attending community events (even when it is not convenient), and taking the initiative in reaching out to members who feel estranged and isolated. Again, these efforts can be arduous, but they are part of what it means to live community when responsibility for 'the others' cannot be projected onto a resident superior.

A third area of formation for contemporary community might be *hospitality*. For many congregations the days when any community member could expect to be received in any community house are long gone. There are few large institutional houses equipped with extra rooms, prepared meals and well stocked linen closets. Receiving fellow religious and their friends often means accepting considerable inconvenience in the form of disrupted schedules, extra housework, budget strain and planning. And yet, being part of a community has something to do with the preferential treatment of members of one's own religious family.

The *commitment of priority time to community affairs* is a fourth and often onerous form of asceticism that one will not likely practise in post-formation situations if it has not been developed during formation. Many religious, especially those living in small groups or singly, will find themselves responsible for much community paper work that once was the duty of the superior. Budgets must be formulated, books kept, questionnaires completed, chronicles written, inventories taken, forms filled out and statistics maintained. The temptation to see these endless and time-consuming details as a distraction from ministry or to excuse oneself on the grounds that one person's participation cannot be that important can be very powerful. Resisting the temptation can be a conscious choice for active community life, especially for those whose lifestyles and/or ministerial commitments could seem to justify non-participation.

A fifth form of asceticism, closely related to this issue of time, is that of *responsiveness to community policies*, especially in financial matters. The variety of lifestyles of contemporary religious necessitates greater personal initiative and responsibility in the handling of salaries, budgets and other financial affairs. It is both inconvenient and sometimes annoying to comply with procedures and directives in this area, especially when they do not seem to take one's own particular living situation into adequate account. Refusing to cut oneself off, to abandon dialogue and go one's

own way is a form of asceticism directly related to community participation.

A sixth area of asceticism in the service of community concerns *participation in community processes*. Corporateness of identity and mission, which once was the product of collective life and work, must now be facilitated largely through community-wide processes which entail committee work, responses to data surveys, voting, writing opinions, attending meetings, reading reports and seemingly innumerable other 'interruptions' in already full schedules. In the extreme, it calls upon the individual to be willing to accept congregational office. Living in community, regardless of lifestyle, means full participation in those processes which enable the members to be community. This has much less to do with sharing the same address than it does with the commitment to shared life expressed in the willingness to foster corporate life and mission even at great cost to oneself.

This is not an exhaustive list, but it can at least suggest that genuine community living today, even though it might take place in a variety of lifestyles, is not a disguised form of that dangerous individualism decried by sociologists of culture and religion.⁷ On the contrary, it can be a powerful countercultural witness announcing the possibility of Christian community, even in our seemingly frantic times and fractured societies. Religious community life in the future will, in all likelihood, not take place in large convents of members of the same congregation. If it is to be a reality for our times, members must be formed to a deeper sense of its meaning and prepared to live it in diverse and changing situations. In this area as in others the Spirit can be trusted to lead us into all truth.

NOTES

¹ This is the position articulated in the Vatican document, 'Essential elements in Church teaching on religious life', Part II, section 2, paragraph 19. Eng. tr. available in *Origins* 13 (July 7, 1983) pp 133-142.

² Canon 665, #1 implicitly equates common life, defined as living within a house of one's congregation, with community life and gives the particular cases in which a superior may permit exceptions to this norm. There is no suggestion that a variety of lifestyles might be equally legitimate or acceptable.

³ Lillanna Kopp, foundress of the Sisters for Christian Community, a non-canonical community founded in 1970 and now numbering approximately 600 members in 14 countries, in *Sudden spring, sixth stage sisters: trends of change in Catholic sisterhoods, a sociological*

analysis (Waldport, Oregon, Sun Spot Publications, 1983), documents the phenomenon I am describing. See esp. p 59 on the SFCC experience.

⁴ For an excellent description of the change in form and function of the family in recent history, see Dolores Curran, *Traits of a healthy family: fifteen traits commonly found in healthy families by those who work with them* (Minneapolis, Winston, 1983), esp. pp 4-16.

⁵ This is the burden of *Gaudium et spes*, Vatican II's Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World. Eng. tr. available in *Documents of Vatican II*, ed. A P Flannery (Grand Rapids, Michigan, Eerdmans, 1984) pp 903-1014. See esp. the oft-cited Preface.

⁶ I have developed this point at greater length in *New wineskins: re-imagining religious life today* (New York/Mahwah, Paulist, 1986) pp 236-265.

⁷ This theme has been masterfully developed by Robert Bellah, and others in *Habits of the heart: individualism and commitment in American life* (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London University of California, 1985).