

# SHIFT IN THEOLOGY

By HOWARD J. GRAY

**I**N WHAT REMAINS one of the more perceptive theological reflections on Vatican II, Christopher Butler has said of chapter VI of *Lumen gentium*:

It must be confessed that this chapter is not among the best of the constitution. This is probably because the theological presuppositions of the religious life have not yet received adequate attention.<sup>1</sup>

Bishop Butler emphasizes two points, that religious do not constitute a 'third state' in the Church alongside laity and clergy but rather that religious can be either lay or cleric and, second, that religious, as constitutive of a distinct social structure within the Church, have a particular role to perform within the Church. Citing efforts to relate religious life to witnessing to the Kingdom, to the gospel, and to the mystery of life itself, Bishop Butler reflects further that 'such a view of the theology of the religious life, deeply biblical in approach, holds promise for the future. The council has but sketched out the idea; it will be for theologians to take it further'.<sup>2</sup>

Bishop Butler has correctly underscored the theological limitations of Vatican II's articulation of what constitutes religious life and how the mission of religious congregations fits into the overall mission of the Church. In his recent response to the U.S. bishops' reports on religious life in the United States, John Paul II emphasizes, three times, the need for a sound theology of religious life, not as something already attained but as an ongoing task for bishops and religious.<sup>3</sup>

This article represents a modest contribution to this enduring need. At first blush, there have, in fact, been a number of excellent theological analyses of religious life since Vatican II. Part of the task of this overview is to reflect these contributions.<sup>4</sup> However, we are at a stage in our theological reflections about religious life where we can look back at the time since Vatican II in order to discern patterns of convergence and divergence and designate the paradigm shift which explains these convergences and divergences.

Before I begin this reflection on the theology of religious life since Vatican II, I want to stress that I am focusing on apostolic religious life not on monasticism or secular institutes: By 'apostolic religious life' I mean not only communities founded to work in ministries outside their community residences but founded to work in ways which are compatible with the life style of the apostles and the early Church, especially as articulated in Acts 4,32-37. An apostolic religious community is, then, one founded for gospel mission.

Another limitation of this presentation is that the author is someone from the industrial West, and, therefore, one who represents only that kind of experience of apostolic religious life. The experiences of apostolic religious life in India, Asia, Central and South America, for example, would be different. Nonetheless, the broad observations which I shall offer represent accurately enough common theological concerns and experiences in other economic, social, political and ecclesial contexts.

*Patterns of convergence and divergence*

In preparation for this article, I wrote to a group of thirty apostolic religious from various communities and in a variety of leadership roles, chronological ages and of both sexes. My intention in contacting these men and women religious was simply to supplement the major written studies on the theology of religious life with data from other sources. This survey, granted its informal organization and somewhat impressionistic tone, provided a clear pattern of convergence and divergence about what has happened in apostolic religious life since Vatican II. From this survey, I noted five major areas of agreement or convergence and five major areas of disagreement (or, at least, alternative interpretation) or divergence.

These are the areas where my correspondents seemed to agree. First, there has been a movement in apostolic religious life away from the presumption that perfection exists in communities to one that renewal, as an ongoing process, must characterize religious life. This is not a startling assertion. As Sandra Schneiders, among others, has argued, the realization that the entire Christian community has been summoned to holiness and that the whole Christian community shares in a mission has confronted religious ever since Vatican II with the need to change their way of thinking about their role in the Church.<sup>5</sup> The years following Vatican II

have called the entire Church to an *aggiornamento*, an updating which implied a concomitant willingness to examine and to amend the way one lives. For many this call has been an unsettling abandonment of once unquestioned practices and community structures; however, for others it has been a salutary challenge to new radicality in incorporating gospel values into their individual and community lives; for still others it has led to their abandoning religious life.

A second area of convergence is the movement from religious segregation to active relationship with other religious communities, diocesan leadership and the wider secular world. The pastoral constitution *Gaudium et spes* invited Roman Catholics to reconsider the way in which they viewed the world.<sup>6</sup> *Perfectae caritatis* invited religious to be part of this general reconsideration so that 'making wise judgments about the contemporary world in the light of faith, and burning with apostolic zeal, they may be able to help men and women more effectively'.<sup>7</sup> The call to openness is not, and was never meant to be, a call to an indiscriminate fusion of religious communities with different charisms nor a blurring of the identity of religious and diocesan clergy nor an abandonment of the authentic demands of religious life. The movement is, though, one from the apostolic and communal isolation which characterized religious life prior to Vatican II to an active commitment to communicate and to collaborate with men and women outside one's religious family.

A third area of convergence is the movement from institutional autonomy to the promotion of the values of the Kingdom of God preached by Jesus. All the religious women and men whom I polled were involved in some institutional setting; however, none saw the institutions from which she or he worked as an unquestionable reality. Prior to Vatican II the vast majority of apostolic religious identified with the work of an institution, whether that institution was a school, a hospital, a social or pastoral centre. Institutional involvement was the way to be apostolic. Since Vatican II there has been a shift in loyalties away from institutional priorities towards Kingdom priorities. Some have read this shift as an abandonment of traditional works; and, indeed, in some instances traditional works have been challenged, modified and even abandoned. However, the shift in focus is consonant with what I wrote earlier in this article. Renewal and a heightened relationship to other realities in the Church and in the world are prompted by

the graced desire to make the gospel a realistic apostolic norm for the choice of ministries. This graced desire governs contemporary apostolic orientation and gospel priorities judge contemporary institutional directions and performances.

A fourth area of convergence centres on the vows, a movement from seeing them as merely functional realities which legally identify religious to apostolic symbols of evangelical presence and work. I would articulate the shift this way. Prior to Vatican II chastity meant both abstinence from any activity which directly caused sexual stimulation and an affective centring of one's life on the love of God and Christ and the service of the neighbour. The vow of chastity was a gift to be protected, a condition for membership, and a liberation from family obligations in order to be available for non-exclusive ministry. Today, while there continues to be a regard for the authentic living of consecrated chastity, there is an effort to relate the vow more directly to the quality of apostolic service. The way I would articulate this contemporary instinct is to say that contemporary consecrated chastity symbolizes a love which people can trust. It is a love and, therefore, represents not only a desire to do good to others but, as apostolic, a desire to offer that love in psycho-religious maturity, as something humane and compassionate.

Similarly, prior to Vatican II, poverty looked towards the renunciation of any independent ownership and use of material goods as well as a commitment to common life. Again, the theological tendency since Vatican II is to sustain these traditional values but also to emphasize the availability of energies, talents and time for other people. The simplest way to articulate this contemporary understanding of apostolic poverty is to say that today poverty is the vow which proclaims that people are more important than things (i.e., possessions, positions, honours, status and the like). Thus, for example, for religious the option to promote the needs of the economic poor is an explicit witness to apostolic poverty, not primarily a political statement.

Obedience prior to Vatican II signified compliance to the commands given by competent religious authority. It is true that the ideal was never merely thoughtless execution of a command but a wholehearted willingness to see the superior's point of view. Again, post-Vatican II understanding of the vow of obedience, while respecting legitimate authority and the need to sustain sound order in community and work, would emphasize obedience more as a

communal effort to be corporately, radically obedient to God's designs. Consequently, wide consultation has become for most apostolic religious a constitutive element in obedience. If the people of God of whom we are part are to exercise their responsibility in the work of the Kingdom, then they must be heard. The apostolic character of obedience resides not only in the object, i.e., the work to be accomplished, but also in the subject, i.e., those who do the work. Obedience is apostolic, then, only insofar as it is inter-relational, belonging to a community committed to bringing its combined expertise, wisdom and experience to communal reflection. The community leader joins in this communal search as a brother or sister also seeking God's concrete designs. The final resolution of this communal search may reside in the superior's or leader's decision; but apostolic religious obedience today expects a richer context of gathering the data, analyzing the options and finally designating priorities for apostolic action.

The fifth area of convergence centres on community life. The respondents to my inquiry noted a move from community as order to community as event. Prior to Vatican II community was a place where tasks were given specific times and locations—prayer, meals, recreation, exchanges with visitors to the community. After Vatican II community life became more an inter-relational event of shared prayer and eucharistic worship; meals, opportunities for companionship as well as for nourishment; recreation, less a time of scheduled performance and more a time to re-create energies; and visitors, less an intrusion on quasi-monastic peace and more a chance to practice Christian hospitality. It was seen that the apostolic character of community life demanded more spontaneous living, not to escape asceticism but to reform asceticism, freeing religious to be available humanely so that they could help others with competence and generosity.

I am not claiming that these post-Vatican II movements in the areas of renewal, relationship, Kingdom priorities, the vows and community life were unalloyed successes. They were not; they are not. But these movements represent important trends, afford valuable data and indicate a direction. These five convergences from the responses which I received are balanced by five areas of divergence. The divergences which I noted centre on five areas: ecclesial identity, authority, poverty, chastity and the specific significance of charism, ministry and orders among apostolic religious.

All the respondents acknowledged the need for an ecclesial context but differed in identifying what kind of ecclesial model best supported apostolic religious life today. The difference of interpretation arises not simply because the mystery of the Church resists only one final formulation. Rather, people just see the ecclesial foundations for their lives differently.

The second area of divergence is that of authority. While everyone appreciates the great value of consultation, some feel that there is confusion between consultation and consensus, i.e. the opinion that until all agree the religious leader or superior cannot bring closure to a question. Consequently, there was a strong expression of impatience among some of the respondents who felt that authority within religious communities must bring timely closure to experimentation. On the other hand, others resist closure, interpreting authority as a persuasive influence, a moral urging, or a spiritual power which guides but does not direct a community towards union in diversity.

A third area of divergence centred on relating the vow of poverty to the service of the poor. There are two interpretations. One interpretation considers the plight of the economically poor as such a dominant and enduring apostolic need that only a concerted community commitment to identify with the poor in life style and in community investments, as well as in apostolic work, can provide effective witness to the vow of poverty. The alternate interpretation is one that acknowledges the plight of the economically poor as one among many other apostolic priorities. For this group the vow of poverty is a complex virtue which demands social responsibility in the use of resources; however, how that social responsibility is to be implemented differs from situation to situation. Apostolic independence and long-term apostolic effectiveness, they argue, demand a certain economic solvency. How all this, in turn, has meaning as 'poverty' remains a problem for this second group.

The fourth area of divergence is in the area of consecrated chastity. The issue is not how to practise a vital chastity but rather what theological position best supports the vow. Opinions about the theological foundations for consecrated chastity fall into three general categories: the vow represents a special, affective relationship to Jesus; the vow, separating one from family preoccupations, commits a religious to an unrestricted availability to the work of the Kingdom; the vow represents the radical universality of the call to discipleship in Jesus where one is neither primarily male

nor female but one in a common call to shared holiness and common mission. This latter theological interpretation of the vow of chastity invites us into the area of 'theological politics', i.e., espousing a position which justifies more universal accessibility to ordination and to Church governance.

The fifth area of divergence is complex. It touches the way religious priests, brothers and sisters view their respective titles to official ministry in the contemporary Church. At the risk of oversimplification let me express the tension this way. For religious priests there is a concern that their ordained priesthood be seen as different in its charism from the priesthood of diocesan priests. That difference centres on mission not on community. While diocesan priests focus on the care of the faithful in a specified geographic area, religious priests tend to define their focus as much wider, including ministry to the unbaptised, the unchurched, the hostile. For religious priests, while the eucharist remains a central pastoral concern, the word of God exercised through the ministry of teaching, preaching, research and spiritual counselling is their preferred area of apostolic competence. Consequently, there is a drive among religious priests to specify the theological foundations of their vocations as religious and priests as one reality not two; and that reality is their charism.<sup>8</sup>

Religious brothers do not share this kind of concern. Their concern is to specify what it means to be called to ministry as lay, religious and male. Beyond the charism unique to each religious congregation, contemporary religious brothers seek a shared charism specifically as brothers which will give them better self-identity and greater apostolic autonomy in their ministries. The concern has a sharper edge among the brothers in communities of priests and brothers than among brothers in exclusively brother communities.

Religious women, especially those in North America, see their womanhood as crucial to their religious consecration. On the one hand, many women apostolic religious feel that they have experienced God, Church, religious life, the vows and apostolic service but within the treasured context of women's psycho-social history. On the other hand, these same women religious also feel that 'their experience' has too often been interpreted, and limited, by exclusively male psychologists, historians, theologians and Church authorities. Feminism, or better for what I am trying to capture here, woman-consciousness is dedicated to righting this hermeneutical wrong.<sup>9</sup> Many apostolic religious women feel that

their experience is only half-articulated, at best, when spoken by men. Moreover, the further ramifications of gender restriction in the area of public ministry in the Church trigger pain and resentment among some of the brightest and most committed women religious.

This summary of opinions represents a fair enough synthesis of views, foundations, as it were, for a theology of religious life. The articulation of such a contemporary theology has been offered in a series of first-rate studies, all of which also mirror the spectrum of convergences and divergences which I have recorded above.<sup>10</sup> A contemporary theology of apostolic religious life will be pluralistic in interpretation,<sup>11</sup> dependent on lived personal experience<sup>12</sup> and concerned with the social and not just the intramural reality of religious life.<sup>13</sup> Where precisely does the shift in the theological paradigm governing contemporary apostolic religious life dwell? To what reality do these fundamental movements lead?

*A changing paradigm: Vatican II and beyond*

The changing theological paradigm governing apostolic religious life today originates in and is sustained by the prior, modified theological paradigm of the Church's identity and mission at Vatican II. This relationship is crucial in understanding why today's apostolic religious is, generally, comfortable with pluralism in interpretations, with a reliance on personal experience and with a commitment to social over exclusively intramural concerns.

At the close of Vatican II, Pope Paul VI, in reviewing all that had been accomplished and in setting a tone for the hard work of implementation, said, 'The old story of the Samaritan has been the model of the spirituality of the Council'.<sup>14</sup> While rhetorically simple enough, this remains a profound, prophetic statement about the paradigm shift that took place at Vatican II. That shift involves the Church's self-consciousness both of her meaning and her mission today. For what transpired at Vatican II was no less than a shift in theological perspective, an *aggiornamento*, whereby the Council made efforts 'to coordinate itself with general culture'.<sup>15</sup> This is not to deny that Vatican II spoke to the Church about matters 'within the family of believers'. But it is also to assert that over and above what I would term 'domestic concerns', Vatican II called the Church to reclaim a pastoral, not a juridical nor a doctrinal, approach towards its identity and its mission. In effect, Vatican II summoned the people of God to discover their universal



call to holiness in being to one another and to their times and to their world a good Samaritan.

This inaugurated, I believe, a startling realignment of identity and mission. Like the rest of the Church, apostolic religious had some adjustments to make. Apostolic religious went through a process of self-scrutiny and experimentation. Thus from around 1965 to 1980, as religious attempted to adapt this new spirituality of the Church to their particular charisms, life styles and apostolic works, there was a dominant emphasis on psycho-social adaptation, i.e. to being a pastoral presence to one another within community. Perhaps nothing better testifies to this preoccupation than the use of the term 'integration' in community renewal documents during this period.<sup>16</sup> By 'integration' community chapters and theologians and psychologists of religious life meant a harmonious union of elements within the apostolic personality, a healthy and productive psycho-somatic personal synthesis. This was, and remains, a wonderful ideal and a value worth pursuing. However, it was an ideal and a value which tended to centre on the minister more than the ministry, on self-realization rather than self-donation. Religious leadership was concerned that life styles, community relationships, governmental structures within congregations and even apostolic assignments enhance the human development of their members. The principle enunciated was something like this: 'Before we can be effective "good Samaritans" to others, we must learn to be "good Samaritans" to one another and to ourselves'. I am trying to describe a tendency not to assert a universal reaction among apostolic religious in this 1965-1980 period. Moreover, I want to avoid giving a handle to those who facilely accuse apostolic religious of becoming unhealthily self-absorbed. What I want to establish is that following Vatican II there was, and continues to be, a reorientation towards pastoral identity which, in turn, has profoundly shifted how religious see themselves and their work. Before religious could freely be good Samaritans to the world, they had to learn how to be such to themselves. This was an intramural concern, but different from the kind of intramural seclusion which marked apostolic religious life prior to Vatican II.

From 1980 on there has been another remarkable shift, one emphasizing mission as the genuinely integrating reality in the life of apostolic religious,<sup>17</sup> towards refounding one's religious community as an effective good Samaritan to the world. What are some of the ramifications of this pastoral paradigm, i.e. of apostolic

religious symbolizing the identity and the mission of the Church as the continuation of the task of the Good Samaritan?

In the Lucan parable what distinguishes the Samaritan from the priest and the levite are four actions.<sup>18</sup> The Samaritan really *sees* the victim lying at the side of the road. The Samaritan *feels compassion* for the victim. The Samaritan *does whatever practical good he can* for the victim. Finally, the Samaritan *establishes a system of sustained care* for the victim even when the Samaritan himself must move along.

When Paul VI characterized the spirituality of Vatican II as that of the Good Samaritan, he also invited the entire people of God to undertake a mission to the world which integrated this fourfold action into their lives. Apostolic religious, as part of the people of God and as consecrated for the explicit promotion of the values of the Kingdom of God, share and, in some way or other, are expected to take leadership in living this fourfold mission.

To see reality as it is to establish a contemplative presence to the world. Such seeing is not simply taking time for prayer but allowing prayer to become a time of revelation, of seeking confidently God's view about people, about our times and culture, about human pain and human dreams. To experience compassion for what we see in reality is truly *pati cum*, to participate in the affective reality before oneself, to experience solidarity in the human condition. Only from contemplative seeing and compassionate solidarity can one, like the Good Samaritan, do the genuinely needed good. Finally, this triad of contemplation, compassion and practical involvement can endure only through self-transcendence, by creating a structure or a process or a set of relationships whereby others (call it collaboration or handing on the task to the next generation) can become similarly contemplative and compassionate doers of the good which testifies that the Kingdom of God is within our community and, to some extent, now within our world.

### *Conclusion*

There is one controlling paradigm shift in the theology of apostolic religious life since Vatican II. This is the shift away from a juridical and towards a pastoral identity and mission. It is a shift which unites apostolic religious to their brothers and sisters within the total ecclesial community. This union comes to life in a common dedication to carry on the presence and the mission of the Good Samaritan. This shift has promise of fulfilling the needs Bishop

Butler so accurately articulated in the citation which opened this article: it is a witnessing to the Kingdom, to the gospel and to the mystery of life itself.

We must recognize that if apostolic religious follow out the ramifications of this shift from juridical to pastoral identity and mission, there will be tensions with any ecclesiastical system which uses a dominantly juridical theological model to identify itself and to govern its mission. This, I suggest, is the core struggle in the efforts to interpret Vatican II today.

If apostolic religious are courageous enough to pursue this pastoral mission, then they will continue to have different experiences, to express their views with a plurality of terms, theories and justifications, and to define service in a variety of ministerial ways. The resolution lies not in suppressing these differences but in acknowledging the inexhaustible mystery which this variety of charisms represents.

Finally, if apostolic religious live out this theological vision, then they will, inevitably, confront that part of the world which rejects the vulnerability which dwells in contemplation, in compassion, in commitment to doing good and in the surrender of power to a new generation or to a new people. The parable of the Good Samaritan, for all its beauty, remains a terrible challenge. To live in the light of this parable, to be a pastoral presence, is to challenge much the world holds dear. It is this pastoral presence which leads religious to the only authenticity Christians can claim, that they laid down their lives for their sisters and brothers.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Butler, Christopher: *The theology of Vatican II* (Westminster, Maryland, 1981), revised edition, p 71.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p 73.

<sup>3</sup> This document is dated February 22, 1989, and was forwarded to all U.S. bishops on March 22, 1989.

<sup>4</sup> The major studies which I consulted were the following: Arbuckle, Gerald A.: *Strategies for growth in religious life* (Staten Island, New York, 1987); Arbuckle: *Out of chaos; refounding religious congregations* (New York, 1988); Azevedo, Marcello: *Vocation for mission, the challenge of religious life today* (New York, 1988), 4th revised edition; Boff, Leonardo: *God's witnesses in the heart of the world* (Chicago, 1981), translated and edited by Robert Fath, *Religious life in the United States, the new dialogue*, ed. Robert J. Daly, et al (New York, 1984); Lozano, John M.: *Life as parable, reinterpreting the religious life* (New York, 1986); Schneiders, Sandra M.: *New wineskins, re-imagining religious life today* (New York, 1986); Woodward, Evelyn: *Poets, prophets & pragmatists, a new challenge to religious life* (Notre Dame, Indiana, 1987).

<sup>5</sup> Schneiders, *New wineskins*, pp 18-44.

<sup>6</sup> Cf O'Malley, John W.: *Tradition and transition, historical perspectives on Vatican II* (Wilmington, 1989), pp 44-49; 59-65.

<sup>7</sup> Cf *Perfectae caritatis*, no 2.

<sup>8</sup> An article which has had tremendous influence in this discussion is that of John W. O'Malley, 'Priesthood, ministry, and religious life: some historical and historiographical considerations'; reprinted from *Theological studies* in *Tradition and transition*, pp 127-171.

<sup>9</sup> Cf Schüssler Fiorenza, Elisabeth: *In memory of her: a feminist theological reconstruction of Christian origins* (New York, 1983).

<sup>10</sup> Cf note 4.

<sup>11</sup> On 'pluralism' cf Mahoney, John: *The making of moral theology* (Oxford, 1987), pp 330-331. McCormick, Richard A., 'Pluralism within the Church', from *Catholic perspectives on medical morals* (Netherlands, 1989), ed. E. D. Pellegrino et al, pp 147-167.

<sup>12</sup> On the role of personal experience, Mahoney, pp 300-347; Duffy, Regis A.: *A Roman Catholic theology of pastoral care* (Philadelphia, 1983).

<sup>13</sup> Gray, Howard J.: 'Challenge to religious leadership: maintenance or mission', *Call to growth/ministry* Vol XI, No 1 (Fall, 1985), pp 2-12; Sobrino, Jon, S.J.: *Spirituality of liberation* (Maryknoll, 1988), Translated by Robert R. Barr.

<sup>14</sup> Paul VI: 'The last general meeting', *Catholic mind* vol 64 (April 1966), p 61.

<sup>15</sup> O'Malley: *Tradition and transition*, p 122.

<sup>16</sup> Cf, for example, *Documents of the 31st and 32nd General Congregations of the Society of Jesus* (St. Louis, 1977), decree 9, 'The training of scholastics, especially in studies', p 113, nn 141-143.

<sup>17</sup> Cf note 13 above.

<sup>18</sup> Cf the exegesis of this parable in Fitzmyer, Joseph A.: *The Gospel according to Luke* (New York, 1985), Vol II, pp 882-890; Woodward: *Poets, prophets & pragmatists*, pp 98-131.