

# THE THEOLOGY OF RELIGIOUS LIFE IN THE *DIRECTIVES*

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## *Introduction*

**T**HIS ARTICLE WILL EXAMINE how the writers of the Roman *Directives* understand the Church and the place of religious life within the Church. It will assess the relative strengths and weaknesses of the theological models of religious life which the *Directives* implicitly or explicitly put forward and their relation to formation.

## *Religious life as mystery*

When I confided to a colleague that I was writing an article on the theology of religious life he responded with ‘Oh God! Not *another* effort to explain religious life: whenever I come across an article like that, I turn the pages and move on to something more interesting!’ With this wintry comfort, I begin my task.

There is a danger of trying to overdefine what is essentially a mystery rooted in God’s providential care for our world. Let me say from the outset that there is no separating the theology of religious life from the theology of Christian life. The theology of Christian life is a theology of grace, a theology of relationships divine and human. Any guidelines on religious formation must be set in the light of this vast mystery of God’s relationship with humanity; they must point towards God and God’s limitless activity in our world. Only with this breadth of perspective will they enable the young religious of the twenty-first century to live in harmony with the project of God for all God’s people.

## *Method*

Our document is about *formation* in religious life rather than about religious life itself: but obviously it is full of presuppositions, sometimes explicit but often implicit, about religious life and its role in the Church and in the world. My intention is to explore these presuppositions in a critically positive manner. If I touch on areas

dealt with in other articles in this issue, it is because religious life and its theology do not exist on their own, but only in persons who have taken vows, who live in community, and who have a mission according to the charism of their Institute.

My way of proceeding will be to note briefly what the *Directives* say about various issues on the understanding that readers are familiar with the overall content of the document. I will then comment on these issues in the hope of illuminating them further. The purpose of the exercise is not to depreciate the *Directives* but to respond to them in order that formation personnel may be helped to understand the parameters of religious life more fully and to integrate these into their formation work. I would note that the opening tapestry of quotations from earlier documents on religious life creates its own difficulty: while the authors have worked hard to link fresh thinking with the understanding and tradition of the past, this leads to definite limitations: one senses the presence of old wineskins which cannot accommodate the new wine.

#### *God's plan for our world*

The *Directives* fail to situate religious life explicitly within the context of the plans of God for our world and, in my view, they thus begin with too narrow a perspective. In [25], however, religious are called 'to be an ecclesial community in the Church and in the world, witnesses and architects of the plan for communion which is the crowning point of human history in God's design'.

Since the context within which religious life is to be understood is a cosmic one it is important to elaborate this statement even briefly here, because unless those in formation are presented with a vision so captivating as to evoke a total personal response, the erosion of confidence and commitment which marks much of religious life at present will continue. What evoked such a limitless response in the heart of Jesus was his appreciation of the primary importance of 'the Father's business'. This cannot be taken for granted in his followers; but without this eschatological vision, religious life, which is oriented towards the *eschaton*, must falter. In the *Directives* the emphasis on the eschatological is weak, as is the notion of religious life as an eschatological sign.

What the Father intends is to bring about a community of total love, in which all persons, both divine and human, are fully open to one another. The work of Jesus was to found this eschatological community of love; the role of the Church is to carry it forward; the

Parousia will complete it. It is succinctly outlined in the Preface of the feast of Christ the King;

As King he claims dominion over all creation,  
that he may present to you, his almighty Father,  
an eternal and universal Kingdom:  
a kingdom of truth and life,  
a kingdom of holiness and grace,  
a kingdom of justice, love, and peace.

Since love will be the defining quality of this all-embracing community, religious life must play its part in the service of this love: whatever forms it may take over the centuries, its goal must be to foster graced relationships among people. Within this perspective, religious formation is formation in love.

The paradigm of these relationships is the Trinity, in which the members exist in their relationships to one another and not otherwise. The implication of a graced interplay is central here: the persons enrich one another. This dimension is sadly missing from the *Directives*. Not only have religious the task of helping to sanctify the world, but they must surely be open to being sanctified by others, whether lay people, diocesan priests, the poor and oppressed, etc. Witness is not a one-way traffic from religious to the laity. There is an ongoing mutual influence: family, friends, work companions and many others contribute to the formation of religious and witness to gospel values.

#### *How the document understands the Church*

Firstly a word on models: they have value in helping us to grapple with reality and to communicate with others. Models are descriptions; they are always operative, and some are more helpful than others. A dictionary definition would state that a model is a small imitation of the real thing. All models then are inadequate, but in situations of tension and controversy the exploring of the model operative in another's mind can bring about an expansion of thinking and a new sensitivity to aspects of the reality which one had neglected. Jesus used models in speaking of the Kingdom of heaven but he did not limit himself to any one of them. In treating of the Church and of religious life we will do well to follow his example because we are dealing with a mystery which eludes definition.

*A communion*

The Church is spoken of as a universal communion in charity, whose source is the communion of the Trinity [23,24]. The word 'communion' recurs twelve times between [23] and [25]. This concept of communion was elaborated in the 1985 synod of bishops; the document on the laity which followed the synod of 1987 makes full use of it. In this latter document reality of the Church as a communion with its inseparable dimensions of the communion of each Christian with Christ and of all Christians with one another provides a breadth of perspective and a sense of complementarity which is sadly missing in the *Directives*. Ecclesial communion 'is organic, in a manner analogous to that of a living and functioning body'. It is characterized by

a diversity and a complementarity of vocations and states in life, of ministries, of charisms and responsibilities. Because of this diversity and complementarity every member of the lay faithful is seen in relation to the whole body and offers a totally unique contribution on behalf of the whole body.

## No lay person

can ever remain in isolation from the community, but must live in a continual interaction with others, with a lively sense of fellowship, rejoicing in an equal dignity and common commitment to bring to fruition the immense treasure that each has inherited. . . . What distinguishes persons is not an increase in dignity, but a special and complementary capacity for service.

This is an excellent outline of the reality of the Church and it is a pity that the authors of the *Directives* did not elaborate something similar in order to situate religious life more organically within the context of the Church.

*A people on a journey*

A number of characteristics are elaborated of this 'people on a journey' [24]. They are helpful and stress the historical dimensions of the Church; they give a sense of dynamism and movement which is a welcome change from the 'solid state' model of the Church. A remarkable little paragraph further on follows up this model of a moving and changing people.

‘To follow Christ’ means that one is always on the road, that one is on one’s guard against sclerosis and ossification, in order to be able to give a living and true witness to the Kingdom of God in this world. [67]

At the end of [24] we read that this people on a journey is ‘finally, a missionary people, which is not satisfied with seeing the Church remain a little flock but is ever seeking to have the gospel announced to every human being’. Surely mission should come first rather than last, for the Church is missionary in its very constitution. What the document lacks is an all-embracing perspective of the missionary challenge to the Church in the contemporary world, an omission which gives a sense of flatness to the *Directives* as a whole: mission defines apostolic religious: they are persons *sent* because God has a task in mind for them. It is mission which gives that sense of identity which the *Directives* set out to offer, so it needs much greater stress than is given it here.

Another lacuna is any reference here to the fact that the Church is the Church of the poor and the oppressed: the preferential option for the poor would need to be emphasized if the *Directives* are to be fully faithful to the Church’s social teaching. Again an opportunity to elaborate the magnificence of the challenge which the world offers to its young religious goes a-begging. What stirs the hearts of the young is to hear the call of Christ dying and rising in the anguish and aspirations of the men and women of our times. The opening statement of *Gaudium et spes* speaks to them deeply:

The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the people of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these too are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ: indeed nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts.

The Church is referred to in various sections as the People of God: this is good despite recent criticism of the term because of its political flavour. The value of the term is that it infers equality among all the members of the Church.

#### *Religious life within the Church*

The place of religious life within the Church is explored throughout chapter 1 of the *Directives*. According to [6], the primary end of

formation is to permit young religious firstly to discover and later to assimilate 'that in which religious identity consists. Only under these conditions will the person dedicated to God be inserted into the world as a significant, effective and faithful witness.'

Within a chain of quotations religious life is described as,

a stable form of living by which faithful, following Christ more closely under the action of the Holy Spirit, are totally dedicated to God who is loved most of all, so that having dedicated themselves to his honour, the upbuilding of the Church and the salvation of the world by a new and special title, they strive for the perfection of charity in service to the Kingdom of God and, having become an outstanding sign in the Church, they may foretell the heavenly glory. [7]

Religious are called to four great fidelities:

Fidelity to Christ and the Gospel, fidelity to the Church and to its mission in the world, fidelity to religious life and to the charism of one's own Institute, and fidelity to humanity and to our times. [18]

Religious life is associated with the mystery of the Church by a special bond. It pertains to its life and holiness. It is a special way of participating in the sacramental nature of the people of God. One's complete gift to God unites the religious to the Church and her mystery in a special way, and urges such a one to work with undivided dedication for the good of the entire body. [21]

### *Participative*

What models of religious life are operating in the *Directives*? From the emphasis on communion referred to above in relation to the Church we can gather that the basic model is a participative one: the *raison d'être* of religious life comes from God rather than from human authority. Religious life is 'a gift of God which the Church has received from her Lord and which by his grace she always safeguards' [1] and [8]. But in [23] we find the *hierarchy* described as the source and foundation of the unity both of faith and of communion. It appears that the hierarchical model of the Church is here overshadowing the model of communion. Surely in a broader perspective, *God* is the source and foundation of communion, and it is the role of the hierarchy to serve and maintain this communion?

*A more perfect way?*

The *Directives* happily avoid any hint that religious are to be a model of Christian life; the important thing is not that they should be imitated but that they should be one sign among others of the Kingdom of God. Does, however, a hint remain that religious life is superior to other states of life in the Church? It seems so. In [21] quoted above the word 'special' is used of religious life in three consecutive sentences, and occurs elsewhere. It is a vague term whose meaning is not explicated. Again, the word 'consecration' occurs throughout and its theological presuppositions need examination.

Here we are touching on a critical issue: one of the deepest and most persistent needs of young religious is to be given an adequate answer to their question 'What is different about religious life?' Since the stated goal of the *Directives* is to elucidate for candidates their religious identity [6], the document needed to address this issue by relating religious life to other forms of the Christian life. If the Church is truly a communion, no part of it can be understood in isolation from the totality. But the task of integrating religious life into the complex organic dynamism of the Church is not tackled in the *Directives* and the failure to do so leads to distortion. The writers would have done better to work out from the common Christian vocation to holiness and to situate religious life within that context. If religious are special, and they are, so too are married and single people and diocesan priests. If religious are consecrated, so too are all Christians, by Baptism. Discussion with lay people makes me acutely aware of the tendency in writings by religious to steal the high ground and to usurp certain terms for their own exclusive use. From a lay viewpoint this raises critical questions regarding their underlying theological presuppositions. Jesus's prayer, 'Consecrate them in the truth' (Jn 17,17) refers, for instance, not only to religious but to all his followers as being consecrated to his mission. Consecration and mission are inseparable, and both are dynamic rather than static modes of life. In a dualistic theology, consecration emphasizes the sense of separation, and that meaning has long been incorporated into the theology of religious life.

We became signs and symbols by our way of life, which often incorporated archaic and meaningless practices, our manner of dress and behaviour and our enclosures. We were to bear eschatological witness in these ways and our ministerial endeavours were perceived to be secondary.<sup>3</sup>

A central stress in *Christifideles laici* is that consecration is for mission and that all Christians are consecrated for the mission of Christ in the world. We accept that in the Eucharist bread and wine are consecrated: do lay people sense that they, who receive what is consecrated and is now Christ himself, are also consecrated? My experience in asking them is that they would not apply the term consecrated to themselves. The verb consecrate means literally 'to set aside for or dedicate to God'. Jesus is set aside or dedicated fully to his Father: I sense that many religious would affirm this to be true of themselves, which is good, and that very few lay people would sense it of themselves, which is bad, because it is false.

A little anecdote will serve to illustrate this point. In a remote Irish village a man had the joy of attending his daughter's final profession. He met a neighbour in the pub that night and proudly proclaimed that his daughter was now consecrated to God. The neighbour queried the meaning of the term, so he thought for a moment and said,

Well, if a lay person fell into a hole you'd pull them out with your hand: but if a consecrated person fell in, you'd have to use a shovel. I mean, you couldn't *touch* them because they're consecrated!

The document does little to overcome this view of reality.<sup>4</sup>

### *The vowed life*

The tendency to reserve the term 'vowed' for religious likewise does little to dispel the erroneous view that there are degrees of citizenship in the Kingdom of God. Religious certainly live a vowed life but are not alone in doing so: married people live a vowed life also, as do hermits, consecrated virgins, members of secular institutes, etc. A married woman pointed out to me,

Vows consecrate married people just as much as they consecrate religious. Marriage vows are not lesser vows than religious ones, but the impression you religious give is that the religious vows are the honours course—that is, until you want to be released from your vows! And you have a vehicle for doing this: laicization. But for married people who take seriously the vows which they make before God, there is no release until the death of the other partner, no matter what suffering is entailed. This makes our marriage vows very sacred indeed. I believe that the vows I took had God as a third



party to them and so, even if I were to be separated, there could be no question of entering a new marriage.

The point here in regard to the *Directives* is that by failing to situate religious life within the full context of Christian life, they distort the reality. Much that is said of religious life in the document could also be said of the lay life and of the diocesan priesthood, but the links are not made. Prior to Vatican II, priesthood and religious life were seen as sacred, over against lay life which was seen as profane. The recent document on the laity notes that in responding to the question 'Who are the lay faithful?' the council went beyond previous interpretations which were predominantly negative and opened itself to a decidedly positive vision by asserting the full belonging of the lay faithful to the Church and to its mystery. At the same time it insisted on the unique character of their vocation. They too then are special. One of the central insights of Vatican II was the acknowledgement that all Christians are called to the same holiness: all are special, all are chosen, all are sacred. There are differing modes of sacrality, and these need to be articulated without falling into the trap of making one out to be superior to the other. Religious vows are sacred: the bonds of marriage are sacred. The two states are distinct from one another and of equal value because God makes them so. It is God who calls a person to one mode of life or another.

#### *Fine lines*

There is then a fine line to be followed between overstating the distinctiveness of religious life and denying on the other hand any specific quality to it. We must not lose our nerve and reduce religious life to nothing: neither must we overstress its differences from the lay or married state. Terminology which carries a whiff of a 'holier than thou' mentality must be eliminated. That we are becoming less sure and less dogmatic about the differences between states of life is a good thing and shows proper reverence for the mystery within which God enfolds us all. We share a common humanity: one goal is set by God for us all: we are to make our way towards the eschatological community of love by slightly different paths, but in essence the meaning of our lives is the same, and we must not lose sight of one another on our common journey. The Church's mission is a single one and God engages a diversity of forms of life to achieve it, and gives a special grace to each state. In the words of *Christifideles laici*:

All the states of life . . . are at the service of the Church's growth. While different in expression they are deeply united in the Church's

mystery of communion and are dynamically coordinated in its unique mission. [55]

### *Why religious life?*

Why does God call people to religious life? For the good of the world: because it is easy for humanity to lose sight of God, it needs living reminders of God. The starkness of the struggle to live out the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, and perhaps especially celibacy, can remind the world of God by showing that some people believe God is all important and can satisfy all the longings of the human heart. Religious life is thus an explicit and public acknowledgement of God in Christ and provides an ampler manifestation of the baptismal consecration of all Christians. Religious life is a very direct intending of the absolute; it is an investment of a whole life in the belief that God is simply first. It is a stepping out of line from one's companions in a radical and dramatic way, so that one becomes a marginal counter-witness to the prevailing values of our world. It is God who chooses people for this task of jolting an unheeding people into an awareness of God. Herein lies the prophetic quality of religious life, which is inadequately exploited in the *Directives*.<sup>5</sup> This is a distinctive contribution to the good of the world. The married life makes a specific contribution of its own, also for the good of the world, and has the glory of revealing the relationship of Christ to his Church to those who wish to notice. Religious community and Christian family life, well lived, both mirror in distinct ways the final community of love. Thus in their differing modes both religious life and marriage unveil God and point to God: to a world which resists God so steadily, each in a specific way reveals God's primacy.

### *Identity*

There is a search for identity which is not peculiar to religious. Everyone who tries to live a life committed to God must deal with the constant changes brought about by that living. The differing demands and chances of life, suffering and loving and the process of aging, require a modification of one's sense of identity. Interaction with others will bring about change. Dialogue between lay people and religious reveals often a convergence of experience in which differences are diminished and any false sense of superiority vanishes. Both groups become humbly appreciative of the mystery which the other is trying to live out despite failure and inadequacy.

Only at the end will it be clear who has lived out their grace most fully. In a sense, both religious and married life are what each person

makes of them. The common challenge is to see all things with God's own vision, and to love universally with God's own love. Either way of life requires not less than everything, but on the other hand, all that is needed is given.

*Experts in community*

Are religious experts in community, as [24] suggests? The term is unfortunate, and may be due to bad translation. Better to say that religious are experienced (*expertī*) in community, and should be dedicated to its formation in the world; we must not overemphasize their contribution, because many lay groups show an equal commitment to this task, the energy for which they derive from the Holy Spirit who is the true architect of all communion.

To build community is a magnificent challenge for religious, but how are they to do it? The *Directives* say that the challenge is answered,

through the profession of the evangelical counsels, which free the fervour of charity from every impediment and cause religious to become a prophetic sign of an intimate communion with God loved above all else; it is also effected through the daily experience of communion of life, prayer and apostolate, essential and distinctive constituents of their form of consecrated life, which makes them a sign of fraternal communion. [25]

*Communities for apostolic discernment*

Surely we can go further, by expanding the brief comment in [24] about the need to develop among religious a manner of thinking not only with, but within the Church. What is in question here is the development of apostolic discernment in common, where a whole group engages its resources together in searching for the will of God. Religious are to be listening posts: listening to God as God speaks in scripture and in the depth of each person's heart in personal prayer; listening to the cry of God's poor, and listening to one another as each struggles to articulate what needs to be done or what direction is to be taken. Communities thus engaged are involved in a group form of the monastic *lectio divina*: they read the signs of the times and the scriptures together (*lectio*); they debate and ruminate over the significance of the data they have gathered (*meditatio*); they ask God for the grace to hear God's voice (*oratio*); in an attitude of contemplation they await God's touch which is experienced as consolation (*contemplatio*); finally, because they are apostolic, they move to decision and implementation (*missio*).

It is, I suggest, in this way that religious can become 'experts in communion' and 'witnesses and architects' of the plan of God. For the whole point of the labour of communal discernment is to move the group into harmony with God's designs for our world. Insofar as tomorrow's religious are formed to engage in communal discernment they have a gift to offer the Church, for the entire people of God as a communion of laity, religious, clergy and hierarchy are all called to have the same contemplative gaze and the same listening ear as we have described above.

### Conclusions

If the theology behind *Perfectae caritatis* is unsatisfactory, and if a theologian of the eminence of Hans Urs von Balthasar runs into difficulty in reworking the theology of religious life, then we must grant the inherent difficulty in the task.<sup>6</sup> I have throughout queried the starting point of the authors of the *Directives*: the medieval scholastics were right in noting that the goal determines the means, and that what is needed then as a point of departure for the document is a cosmic vision of the destiny of humanity: then would come a sketch of the grandeur of the mission of Jesus and of the Holy Spirit. There would follow an elaboration of the entrusting of this universal mission of salvation to the Christian community, and an outlining of the specific tasks entrusted to different groups—lay persons, religious, clergy, etc.—within the overall and common mission. *Gaudium et spes* traces the outline of such a theology; *Christifideles laici* brings it forward helped by the articulation of the Church as communion by the 1985 Synod. The building blocks are there and good writings abound with which to elaborate a vision of religious life worthy of God, and worthy of total commitment by the young people of tomorrow.

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> *Christifideles laici*, 1988, n.20.

<sup>2</sup> *Religious and human promotion*, 1980, n.24.

<sup>4</sup> Foley, Nadin, O.P.: 'The nature and future of religious life', *Religious life review*, March/April 1990, Vol 29, p 74.

<sup>4</sup> It is refreshing to see a psychiatrist use the term 'consecrated' in reference to ordinary persons who try to live discerningly: 'Consecration is the bridge between reformation and transformation, the integrating choice that assents to God's homeward call. It is impossible to say when consecration actually begins . . . . A life lived . . . in trying to bring all one's faculties into harmony with God's transforming grace, is consecration in practice.' May, Gerald G.: *Addiction and grace* (San Francisco, 1988), pp 162-63.

<sup>5</sup> Cf O'Murchu, M.S.C., D.: *The prophetic horizon of religious life* (London, 1989).

<sup>6</sup> Balthasar, Hans Urs von: *The Christian state of life*; English trans. McCarthy, Sr Mary Frances (San Francisco, 1983); German original 1977; critically reviewed by O'Hanlon, Gerard, in *Milltown Studies*, no. 22 (Autumn 1988), pp 111-117.