

# Ecclesial religious communities old and new

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**L**AST SEMESTER I TAUGHT A SEMINAR COURSE ON 'Religious life and lay communities'. The seven students who made up the seminar reflect some of the diversity that characterizes ecclesial communities today. The group consisted of two African women, a religious of the Holy Child from Nigeria and a member of the Grail from Tanzania; two other women religious, one a missionary from western Canada, the other a vocations director in Ontario; two laymen, both interested in base communities in Latin America; and a diocesan seminarian. Through their questions and research, these students contributed to this study.

Sandra Schneiders' book, *Finding the treasure: locating Catholic religious life in a new ecclesial and cultural context*, situates religious life as a human phenomenon among the world religions.<sup>1</sup> Although the many forms taken by religious life have been and continue to be rich and varied, all are inspired by the spiritual quest common to the world religions. Schneiders draws on the anthropological archetype of the monk, the psychological archetype of the virgin and the sociological ideal type of the religious virtuoso in order to understand religious life as a phenomenon deeply rooted in our humanity.<sup>2</sup>

This article focuses on contemporary experience of ecclesial communities within the Roman Catholic tradition. These communities include established religious orders and congregations, some hundreds of years old, new ecclesial movements, many of them formed since Vatican II, and base Christian communities. There are canonical distinctions between orders, congregations, associations and institutes. In this article I have used the term 'community' to describe all those groups whose members choose to respond to their baptismal call by joining with persons of similar commitment. My particular interest is in the ecclesiological significance of these communities.

## *The emergence of ecclesial communities*

As a woman religious who belongs to a congregation founded in France in the seventeenth century, I have experienced the dramatic shifts in spirituality and life-style arising from Vatican II. Perhaps no

group of people within the Roman Catholic Church received the directives and challenges of Vatican II with as much enthusiasm as religious congregations of women. 'The Decree on the Appropriate Renewal of the Religious Life' mandated a two fold process: (1) a continuous return to the sources of all Christian life and to the original inspiration behind a given community, and (2) an adjustment to the changed conditions of the times.<sup>3</sup> The process was both painful and exhilarating.

The return to the original inspiration often uncovered surprising information about courageous women and men who did not fit into established institutions. New contexts demanded new responses. The stories of the many congregations of apostolic women that began in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and which continued into the twentieth century need to be heard.<sup>4</sup> New forms of religious life developed alongside the monastic life which was the only form of religious life for women officially recognized by the church.<sup>5</sup> Are we in the midst of a similar development of new forms today? The post-Tridentine congregations seem unable to attract younger members, at least in North America and western Europe. Many religious orders in the West are experiencing a period of diminishment as their members age and few younger people are choosing their form of life. International orders often have a vibrant new membership in Africa and Asia while their European and North American communities decrease.<sup>6</sup> At the same time there are numerous emerging religious communities and lay movements known as 'Associations of the Christian Faithful'. Small Christian communities of various kinds are springing up in all parts of the world.

In 1989 Jean Vanier, founder of L'Arche, one of the new communities, predicted:

A renaissance is coming. Soon there will be multitudes of communities founded on adoration and presence to the poor, linked to each other and to the great communities of the church, which are themselves being renewed, and have already journeyed for years and sometimes centuries. A new Church is indeed being born.<sup>7</sup>

Jean Vanier's prediction is being fulfilled as new communities emerge and older communities struggle to refound themselves. What can the new communities learn from the older established orders and congregations? What can established orders learn from the new communities? What lessons do base Christian communities offer?

What challenges do all these communities present to the larger church and to the world?

***Established congregations and new ecclesial movements***

The reality that many orders and congregations are facing has inspired much soul-searching and theological reflection. Vatican II's recovery of our common baptismal vocation and the universal call to holiness has challenged members of religious orders to rethink their call. Although there are divergent ways of interpreting the present situation there is general acknowledgement that this is a time of crisis or of *kairos*.<sup>8</sup> Joan Chittister suggests that older orders and congregations need to keep 'fire in these ashes' in order that something new may come to birth.<sup>9</sup>

Schneiders' definition of Catholic religious life is helpful in distinguishing it from other forms of dedicated Christian life.

Religious Life is a prophetic life form in the Church whose prophetic character is rooted in and derives from the celibate solitude that unites contemplative immediacy to God and solidarity with the marginalized of society and expresses itself in the vows that address to the world the challenge of the Reign of God.<sup>10</sup>

The growth of new movements within the church has been enthusiastically proclaimed as a sign of the presence of the Spirit in our day. Some of these movements are well known: L'Arche, Focolare, Communion and Liberation, Opus Dei, Sant' Egidio, the Neocatechumenate, the Grail, Catholic Worker. Others such as Madonna House are less known. Some were formed after Vatican II while others were founded prior to the council but have been deeply influenced by Vatican II's call to universal holiness.<sup>11</sup>

The various ecclesial movements differ significantly from one another in their organization and purpose but are often grouped together as movements of the Spirit in our age. An event which recognized and celebrated these movements occurred on Pentecost Sunday 1998, when over 300,000 members of 56 new communities met with the pope. Prior to this gathering a conference was held on the theme 'The Ecclesial Movements of the Third Millennium'.<sup>12</sup>

Many of these movements are international. They are composed of men and women, married and single, with a large percentage of young people. They are predominantly lay although they may have members who are priests. Sometimes they include members of other Christian

churches or other religious traditions. Both in worship and in life-style the influence of the monastic tradition is often evident. They have been encouraged by recent popes, and especially by John Paul II, who sees them as missionaries of a new evangelization.

Some of the movements have been criticized for cult-like characteristics.<sup>13</sup> Fear has been expressed that they are sects or churches within the Roman Catholic Church. They have sparked division within parishes and controversy between priests and bishops, and between bishops and the pope. It has been suggested that these problems are the growing pains of something new that is emerging within the Church.

The movements have a relationship with the pope and the Vatican through the Pontifical Council of the Laity which has ensured their freedom to develop their particular charisms. Their influence has penetrated not only into the life of the universal church but also into the political and social life of many countries.

Base Christian communities exist in many countries and take many forms. Those in Latin America have been widely studied but there are also large numbers in the Philippines, in Africa, and throughout the world. Many Christians see them as a new way of being Church, a church from the base. Unlike religious congregations or the various lay movements which are for a particular segment of the population, the base ecclesial communities are for everyone. As Latin American members have insisted: 'They are not a movement within the church, but the church in movement.'<sup>14</sup>

Base Christian communities are extremely diverse. Some are associated with parishes or religious congregations while others may be anti-institutional. One particular form of base community might be called 'Women Church', gatherings of mainly Catholic women who come together to provide spiritual support for one another.<sup>15</sup> There are numerous other groups that join together in community to carry out a specific purpose. Covenant House, for example, is a community which reaches out to homeless young people on the streets.

### *Some commonalities and differences*

The older congregations and the new movements have many common characteristics: the search for God, the outreach to the marginalized, the choice of a communal lifestyle, a formal relationship to the Church. Each community has developed its own way to live these commitments. The history of the Church reveals great variety and freedom in how individuals and communities respond to their vocation. Religious orders and congregations usually express their commitment

in the traditional three vows of poverty, chastity and obedience professed as a lifetime choice. Newer communities have different ways of expressing their commitment, often in the form of promises for a specific period of time. Members of both older and newer communities choose to live their baptismal commitment by joining with others in living an evangelical life-style.

The search for God finds expression in reaching out to one's neighbour, especially those on the margins of society. Once again the ways of doing this are varied and distinctive. In the past care for the marginalized often took place in institutions owned and maintained by religious groups. As governments have assumed responsibility for many of the institutions that provide care, outreach to the neighbour, especially those on the margins of society, is often done in ways that are more immediate and personal.

The base Christian communities also share many of the characteristics described above. They are generally less structured and more praxis-orientated than either religious congregations or the ecclesial movements. They are often composed of the marginalized; thus they are a church *of* the poor rather than a church *for* the poor.

### *Ecclesial significance*

Both the established orders and congregations and the newer movements are not part of the Church's hierarchical structure but rather belong to the charismatic element of the church. Religious Life itself in its many forms is a charism, a gift to build up the Church, while each religious community has its own particular charism which draws persons who resonate with it to seek admission. Discerning the charism of individuals as well as of groups is an important and demanding task. The responsibility for discerning the authenticity of an ecclesial community belongs, in the words of *Lumen gentium*, 'to those who preside over the Church, and to whose special competence it belongs, not indeed to extinguish the spirit, but to test all things and hold fast to that which is good.'<sup>16</sup>

Many religious orders, congregations and ecclesial movements enjoy pontifical status. This means they are not restricted to a particular local church or diocese but are free to respond to the needs of the universal Church.<sup>17</sup> However, they must obtain the permission of the local ordinary in order to serve in his diocese. The older congregations have learned to live within the local church and at times find themselves absorbed within diocesan or parochial structures. This is particularly true of clerical orders. Such absorption makes it difficult for religious

women and men to fulfil their prophetic vocation within the Church. The newer communities began in a particular cultural context but have rapidly become international. They are often highly centralized and through their Vatican connections they contribute to a centralized view of Church. Gradually they are finding a place within local churches as bishops are encouraged to welcome these movements.<sup>18</sup>

Cardinal Ratzinger in his address on 'The Theological Locus of Ecclesial Movements' expressed his dissatisfaction with a dialectic which contrasts the charismatic and the institutional aspects of the Church.<sup>19</sup> He argued that such an approach sets up too sharp a split between two constitutive dimensions of the Church. Instead he contrasted local churches with universal missionary activity, suggesting that the universal and missionary dynamism of the itinerant apostles of the early Church continued in the Petrine ministry and the apostolic movements. He distinguished this universal element from local ecclesiastical ministry and emphasized the need for collaboration between the two kinds of ministry: the sacramental-hierarchical ministry of the local churches and the apostolic movements that serve the universal mission and spreading of the Gospel.

Such a distinction between local and universal elements offers a way of viewing religious life throughout the ages as well as the new apostolic movements. At the same time it clearly limits the sacramental-hierarchical ministry to men while recognizing the apostolic gifts of women past and present.

The base Christian communities are a way of being Church, a Church from below. Networks of various communities have developed. The base communities in Latin America see themselves as part of the one universal Church, in communion with their clergy, their bishops and the pope. Clashes between two views of Church, one a hierarchical view, the other a view from the base community, have created certain tensions. While the Conference of Latin American bishops at Medellin (1968) and at Puebla (1979) supported the base communities as 'centres of evangelization and moving forces of liberation', the Vatican response to base ecclesial communities has been somewhat less enthusiastic than that towards the ecclesial movements. Both the present pope and Paul VI have warned base communities against isolation and ideological exploitation.<sup>20</sup> Some base communities, including 'Women Church' communities, reject any formal relationship with the institutional Church but maintain that they too are Church.

***What can be learned from established communities***

Established communities have valuable experience of living and working together that can be shared with new communities and with the larger Church. They have struggled long and hard to build communities based on adult relationships. Religious no longer see themselves as a labour force within the Church but as a prophetic voice reminding themselves and others of the one thing necessary. They offer examples of fidelity over a long period. In a world of change they provide evidence that life-long commitment is possible.

Older communities have learned to practise discernment in decision-making and to embody their founding charism in new situations. The founders of communities are charismatic leaders who attract others to follow them. The death of the founder is a particularly difficult time as the community struggles to continue the mission and spirit which animates it. Older orders have gone through this transition and may offer some wisdom on how to institutionalize a charism so that it will continue and remain vibrant.

One of the gifts that religious congregations might give to the larger Church is a renewed understanding of the traditional vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. These vows are being re-thought as the expression of a way of life rooted in faith rather than as obligations. They point to values which challenge all people but which some Christians embrace as a way of structuring their lives. Schneiders and others see the vowed life as a voluntary marginality.

By not undertaking one's species role as reproducer of the race, by not participating in a capitalist economy by the acquisition or use of wealth for personal purposes, by not exercising political power for individual goals, the Religious situates herself at the edges of the systems that make the culture function.<sup>21</sup>

From this marginal position religious can share the 'hermeneutical advantage of the poor'. The position is also described as one of liminality.<sup>22</sup> Vows are not static but dynamic, allowing for change and growth. Rather than imposing boundaries they offer horizons for living a radical Christian life.<sup>23</sup> Although not all are called to the public profession of vows, all Christians are called to live the evangelical values that they represent: mutual sharing of resources, non-exploitative relationships, and collaboration for mission.

*What can be learned from ecclesial movements and communities*

The new movements demand a willingness to risk and call for a deep trust in God. While older communities are learning to cope with diminishment, some of the newer movements are faced with the problem of rapid growth.<sup>24</sup> They often have a flexibility in responding to changing needs which established groups may lack. The different ways of belonging allow for flexibility and may be attractive to younger people for whom a lifetime commitment seems impossible. But, while some may grow into such a commitment, others need time and support for this growth.

A study undertaken in the summer of 1998 by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate at Georgetown University, Washington, obtained information on 168 emerging communities and lay movements.<sup>25</sup> A number of trends or patterns were noted: the importance of prayer and contemplation, the importance of evangelization, the continued attractiveness of Benedictine, Franciscan, and Carmelite spiritualities, decreased activity in the traditional institutional ministries of the church, and the importance of a larger Catholic culture in which religious life is familiar and accepted. The active role of the bishop in encouraging new communities is also important.<sup>26</sup>

The base ecclesial communities offer less structured ways to be church and an alternative ecclesiology which recognizes the universal church as present within the small gathering of the faithful. They are often the church of the poor and marginalized. Whereas some religious groups are élitist, the base communities in Latin America remind us that the Church is for all and particularly for the poor and oppressed. 'Women Church' communities remind us that the Church is also the church of women. Mary Ann Hinsdale suggests that Women Church is an example of the interruption of the Spirit challenging the larger Church to recognize women's full humanity as persons.<sup>27</sup>

Base communities have developed creative ways of fostering the gifts of their members and recognizing these gifts as ministries. There is a basic equality as each one contributes to the community. In some communities priests and bishops are learning to minister within this dynamic context. All participate in the life and mission of the community according to their gifts and the needs of the community.

Much can be learned from the diverse experiences of ecclesial communities within the Church. They remind one another and the larger Church that the purpose of all forms of religious life is the search for God, and that God is found among our sisters and brothers, especially among the poor. The place of community in the search for



God and in outreach to the neighbour is being experienced in many ways. The focus on community is itself a prophetic stance in our individualistic society.

Ecclesial communities by their way of life should offer a challenge to the world and to the Church as they live out their prophetic vocation. Johannes Metz suggests that religious might serve as shock therapy, reminding their brothers and sisters of each Christian's call to the following of Christ.<sup>28</sup> Today this shock therapy assumes a variety of expressions from ecclesial communities old and new.

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#### NOTES

1 Sandra M. Schneiders, *Finding the treasure: locating Catholic religious life in a new ecclesial and cultural context* (New York: Paulist Press, 2000).

2 *Ibid.*, chapter one, 'Religious life as a human phenomenon among the world religions: monastics, virgins, virtuosi', pp 3–40. See also Diarmuid O'Murchu who situates Roman Catholic religious life within the larger framework of world religions, *Reframing religious life: an expanded vision for the future* (Middlegreen, Slough: St Pauls, 1995); *Povérty, celibacy, and obedience: a radical option for life* (New York: Crossroad, 1999).

3 'Decree on the Appropriate Renewal of Religious Life', 2 in *Documents of Vatican II*.

4 Elizabeth Rapley, *The dévotes: women and church in seventeenth-century France* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1990) describes how women formed communities in order to be able to respond to unmet needs.

5 Following the Council of Trent all religious women were ordered to accept solemn vows and full monastic discipline or be dispersed. Although not officially recognized as 'religious' until 1900, noncloistered apostolic congregations of women continued to flourish.

6 Religious Life in Africa also faces challenges as it becomes more integrated into African culture. See John Kapenda, 'Religious Life in Africa', *Human Development* 21 (Winter 2000), pp 40–45.

7 Jean Vanier, *Community and growth*, 2nd revised edition (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), p 63.

8 For different approaches to the same phenomenon see Ann Carey, *Sisters in crisis: the tragic unravelling of women's religious communities* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor Press, 1997) and *Living in the meantime: concerning the transformation of religious life* edited by Paul J. Philibert (New York: Paulist Press, 1994), in which a number of authors reflect on the *kairos* of this particular moment of the Church's life.

9 *The fire in these ashes: a spirituality of contemporary religious life* (Kansas City: Sheed and Ward, 1995).

10 *Finding the treasure: locating Catholic religious life in a new ecclesial and cultural context*, p 126.

11 Opus Dei was founded in 1928, the Catholic Worker in 1933, Focolare in 1943, and Madonna House in 1947. The Grail, an international movement of Christian women, began in Holland in 1921 and in North America in 1940.

12 Brendan Leahy describes these events in 'Charism and institution – a new ecclesial maturity', *The Furrow* 50 (May 1999), pp 278–285. Cardinal Ratzinger addressed the conference on 'The Theological Locus of Ecclesial Movements'. See *Communio* 25 (Fall 1998), pp 480–504.

13 See Gordon Urquhart, *The Pope's armada: unlocking the secrets of mysterious and powerful new sects in the Church* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1999). As a former member of Focolare, Urquhart focuses on three of the largest and most successful of the new movements: Focolare, Neocatechumenate, and Communion and Liberation.

14 Margaret Hebblethwaite, *Base communities: an introduction* (New York: Paulist Press, 1994), p 15. Hebblethwaite's book provides a helpful study of base communities in Latin America. See also Leonardo Boff, *EcclesioGenesis: The base communities reinvent the Church* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1986); *Church, charism and power: liberation theology and the institutional Church* (New York: Crossroad, 1985); Jon Sobrino, *The true church and the poor* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1984). For a study of base communities in North America see Bernard J. Lee and Michael A. Cowan, *Dangerous memories: house churches in our American society* (Kansas City: Sheed and Ward, 1986).

15 In Canada the first gathering of what became Catholic Network for Women's Equality (CNWE) took place in 1981. It is an example of 'Women Church'.

16 *Lumen gentium* 12, *Documents of Vatican II*.

17 See Canon 589 of the 1983 *Code of canon law*. In 1982 Pope John Paul II established Opus Dei as an international personal prelature. Other international movements have been recognized by the Pontifical Council for the Laity.

18 In *Redemptoris missio*, 72 (1990) John Paul wrote: 'When these movements humbly seek to become part of the life of local churches and are welcomed by bishops and priests within diocesan and parish structures, they represent a true gift of God both for new evangelization and for missionary activity properly so-called.'

19 Cardinal Ratzinger addressed the conference prior to the Pentecost Vigil of 1998 on 'The Theological Locus of Ecclesial Movements'. See *Communio* 25 (Fall 1998), pp 480–504.

20 Paul VI, *Evangelii nuntiandi* (1975) and John Paul II, *Redemptoris missio* (December 1990). 'See Appendix 3: Documentation' in Hebblethwaite, pp 179–187.

21 Schneiders, p 327.

22 This understanding of the vows has been presented by Diarmuid O'Murchu who maintains that vows are not a privileged call for a select few but a system of values that has ramifications for culture. *Poverty, celibacy, and obedience: a radical option for life* (New York: Crossroad, 1999); *Religious life: a prophetic vision* (Notre Dame: Ave Maria Press, 1991).

23 Barbara Fiand reflects on the dualistic, patriarchal and hierarchical spirituality that still permeates our ecclesial structures. She calls for a holistic spirituality which understands the vows as horizons which beckon us rather than actions we promise to do or not do. *Living the vision: religious vows in an age of change* (New York: Crossroad, 1999).

24 Jean Vanier describes 'the risk of growth', *Community and growth*, p 160.

25 For a sociological study of these communities see Patricia Wittberg and Mary E. Bendyna 'Portrait of emerging religious communities in the United States' in *Horizon: Journal of the National Religious Vocation Conference* 25 (Winter 2000), pp 15–21.

26 The study suggested that other communities might be well advised to emphasize working with youth, a spiritual focus, and perhaps Marian devotion if they wish to attract relatively larger numbers of entrants, p 21.

27 Mary Ann Hinsdale, 'Women's struggle for voice as interruption of the spirit' in Mary Heather MacKinnon, Moni McIntyre, Mary Ellen Sheehan (eds), *Light burdens, heavy blessings: challenges of church and culture in the post Vatican II era*, (Quincy, IL: Franciscan Press, 2000), pp 95–113.

28 Johannes B. Metz, *Followers of Christ: perspectives on the religious life*, Thomas Linton (trans) (London: Burns & Oates, 1978).