Growing Up with a Call to Religious Life

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How does one discern a call to the religious life if one feels a sense of being called as one is growing up? This article explores this process.

I

The call to religious life, while I was growing up in the mid-fifties of the twentieth century, was a fairly straightforward affair. The teachers of my junior and senior homeroom—sisters (in my case) of the particular congregation in charge of the high school I attended—usually identified those of us who most likely had a “vocation” and challenged us to discern God’s call. The struggle to explore one’s preferred future, especially for girls, generally entailed the choice between eventual marriage (the single life was not sought after or seen as something one chose) and sisterhood—the “call to perfection.” If one had a boyfriend or a parent who resisted religious life, this choice often was more painful than for those of us whose parents considered it a long prayed-for honor to have a religious in the family.

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The Mystique of Religious Life

For many of us in the days before the Second Vatican Council (Vatican II), religious life had a particular mystique. We were steeped in Catholicism, and choosing what God called us to—becoming holy that way, was actually of considerable importance to us, even as teenagers. It was a topic discussed earnestly in our classes, prayed over on student retreats, and explored with the parish priest. The vocation to religious life was seen as coming directly from God. It was not always appreciated or accepted joyfully, of course, especially by those of us for whom marriage, children, and falling in love were attractive future possibilities, and for whom the long robes and headdresses of the sisters seemed cumbersome and unpleasant.

Others among us, however, were drawn by the mystique of religious life. We were attracted to the sisters who taught us, by their care, discipline, education, intelligence, devotion to prayer, and zeal for the mission. Their special relation to Jesus of Nazareth seemed fascinating. I know that for me this was a major factor in “answering the call;” so also, however, was my desire to teach. It was not difficult to choose the congregation to which I wanted to belong, since teaching had truly been the passion of my short life, and I could envision little else for myself and for my future happiness. Being a teacher because God had called me to this task as a sister seemed a perfect fit.

Though Jesus was concretely a person for me during my discerning years, and his presence in the tabernacle was most real, I cannot say that the “bridal mysticism” and essential celibacy that seem so important in some of the literature on this topic (Schneiders, 2000, 2001) was primary to my understanding of religious life. I knew I wanted to be a sister, and God’s will and the person of Jesus were clearly in the forefront of this knowledge, but the sisters I loved and admired were an important motivation as well. They were models for me and, I believe, for many of my schoolmates. We wanted what they were and stood for. Working and living community with them meant a great deal.

Emancipation

Reflecting on my early experience of “vocation” almost fifty years later, I do wonder whether perhaps a largely unconscious “emancipatory” energy may not also have driven me, as well as many of the girls who entered around the time

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of my youth: women achieving positions of leadership and influence, women making a difference meant something, even if we would never have thought of articulating it that way. Many of us from the working class of that time could not have easily afforded the education and achieved the professional distinction that religious life offered. To be part of a group that allowed for this, to stand one with women of excellence was truly attractive.

The vow of celibacy was, of course, part of it all. Few of us high school graduates, however, really understood the theology that supported this prerequisite, and, it seems to me now, that many of us accepted it without any great concern for what this commitment might ultimately mean for us as we matured into womanhood. In the novitiate we studied the theology of the vows (written years ago for us and based on the still prevalent dualistic view of perfection we were expected to embrace). We memorized the constitutions of our congregations, practiced modesty of the eyes, and learned to ask permission for even the minutest details of our daily life. We accepted most of this in stride, even if we found some of the rules strange. The Catholic culture’s embrace of religious life as noble and as a genuine vocation for young people of my age generally made the choice a relatively normal, if not always an easy, affair. A lifetime (perpetual) commitment to it seemed not only possible but, actually, a clear and viable goal for us.

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Moving into the Now

That was then, almost half a century ago. Much has changed since, both for me and for religious life and religious congregations. Discerning a call seems very different today. Theologically major transformation happened with Vatican II, and many of the changes point directly to the council and its declarations. However, other remarkable but less immediate shifts, whose consequences are still unfolding today, happened when Catholics, the Catholic laity in particular, and women and men religious as part of them, took the pronouncements of the council seriously and, accordingly, began to redefine themselves as well as their place in the church. A re-visioning of the church as the “people of God” impelled them, over the years following the council, to claim their rightful place in the church, to question and probe into the life and structure of their church and, finally, to expect accountability not only of themselves but of their leaders as well.

Encountering a Different God

Perhaps most important among the changes in our understanding of “vocation” was a transformed image of God and of God’s workings in our lives. The
transcendent deity, the Holy One “out there,” the God above us, who calls special persons to transmit his favors, moved for many Catholics after Vatican II from a God above to a God within; from the sacred place “beyond” us to the sacred place “in” each of us, the sacred place, in fact, that also is all of creation. These changes did not happen immediately, of course. But as Catholics began seriously to study theology (something few of us, aside from those eligible for ordination, were allowed to do before Vatican II), insights such as being the temple of God, radiating God’s presence, gathering as the people of this God, and rejoicing in the grace that is ours as faith community became realities that made categories of holiness and worthiness ever less meaningful.

**Claiming Ministry**

The elitism or “special-ness” that pointed to the select few who walked the “less traveled road” came under serious scrutiny, and Catholics gained a deeper understanding of God’s reign and a broader perspective on ministry. We discovered and learned to appreciate as a message for all of us “that there is a dynamic influence of God in our midst. . . . Its standards and its work, its very style of working, are not those of the world’s ambition and sensuality but are love, service, a dying to self and a rising” (O’Meara, 28). We accepted our own ministerial responsibility, therefore, in many of the services called forth by the needs of the community and embraced by us for the sake of God’s reign. We began to claim ministry, a term that had previously been very “elitist” in its use. We started to see it as ours, too, whenever we served God’s people in love—as a phenomenon of the Spirit reaching beyond ordination. “The kingdom of God is the horizon of ministry,” Thomas Franklin O’Meara assures us.

The Kingdom of God is the source, the milieu, the goal of ministry. The presence of God in our complex world enables ministry, gives ministry its life and its freedom. The church, rather than being the dispenser of ministry, stands with ministry within the kingdom as something derivative, fragile, secondary, temporary. (O’Meara, 29)

We began to accept and eventually to celebrate that we are all created, and continue to be created, in God’s image—every one of us in Persona Christi. With this, also, the divisiveness of the gender issue slowly moved toward a non-issue—theologically meaningless for more and more of us. Increasingly today, women no longer see themselves as inferior members of the Body. They accept the holiness of their creation and their right to serve for the sake of God’s reign.

Elsewhere, I have suggested that the meaning of sacrament changes as well when one’s sense of the Holy becomes all encompassing, and God no longer is understood as working from the inside out or the top down. This, I believe, happened and is continuing to happen among us:
We were taught long ago that a sacrament “effects what it signifies,” that it brings about the grace. But what, I wonder, happens when what the sacrament “effects” happens long before it is administered? . . . What if holy presence permeates our being and our gratitude is Eucharist? Where does community begin and end here? Where in the unity experienced can God possibly be extraneous? Is it not that God is in us and we in God? Perhaps this is the really real, and nothing needs to be added. All simply needs to be celebrated, since all is holy. (Fiand 2002, 31, 32).

Cultural Factors

An ancient saying informs us that “When the student is ready, the teacher appears.” It is my sense that Vatican II happened for us when we, as Catholics, were ready. Much of this readiness can, I believe, be traced to larger cultural changes and consciousness raising that had really nothing to do with Catholicism proper and were, rather, a magnificent manifestation of God’s Spirit at work throughout creation and in all of humankind.

Almost from the beginning of the twentieth century we have seen a gradual collapse of the dualistic worldview that nurtured Christianity since its formalization in the early days of its missionary endeavors shortly after the death/resurrection of Jesus. It was the worldview, first formulated by Greek metaphysics, that later was used to articulate and explain orthodox Christian belief. It endured, with numerous and diverse adaptations, through the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, received a major boost with rationalism and empiricism, ruled through the Enlightenment into the twentieth century when finally science, grounded in it and firmly established in Newton’s mechanical world, was shaken to its very foundations through its own discoveries and forced to see things otherwise.

The Impact of Science

The discoveries of Einstein and, what today we have come to call the “quantum perspective,” effected changes of shocking proportions in how we see the world, ourselves in the world, and reality as a whole. The transformation brought about by these changes is unfolding even now, though resistance to it from various quarters, including the Christian churches, persists. Most of the discoverers of the “new science” would themselves have preferred things otherwise, and the aftershock of their findings is still being absorbed. What is important for our discussion here is the realization that insights that affect humanity gestate a long time and are rarely if ever completely conscious, even as they begin to change how things are seen, and the way things are done. The difficulty for Catholicism, in particular, is that it has never existed in any other than the dualistic worldview. It has, through two thousand years, allowed itself to be shaped by it and to be
affected by it with certainties and absolutes that are today very painful, albeit extremely necessary, to overcome.

Science today informs us that we live in a world of total interconnectedness and consciousness where matter and spirit distinctions become obsolete. Thought is energy, we are told, and affects its surroundings, effectively nullifying our cherished categories of “total objectivity” and “mere subjectivity.” Nothing happens anywhere in the universe that does not affect everything everywhere instantly. In this universe, change is the only constant. We are part of this reality, intimately intertwined with it. We are neither its lords nor its slaves. Our creativity affects it; our neglect and domination do also. The universe is a whole, and we are part of this whole, which is larger than the sum of its parts even as it is contained in each part. It is expanding from every point, and we—each one of us—are therefore its center. There is no up or down in this universe, and terms such as “outside and inside,” artificial boundaries and exclusions are meaningless. We are here. We belong here—star dust, with ancient origins.

The theology that needs to respond to these insights is indeed exciting and filled with extraordinary possibilities. (See especially Cannato, 2006; Combs, 1996; Conlon, 1997; Fiand, 1996, 2002, 2006; Jäger, 1989; Liderbach, 1989; O’Murchu 2000, 2002, 2004; Russell, 2002; Teilhard de Chardin, 1959; Toolan, 2001; Wessels, 2000.) Fear, however, can ruin creativity and dialogue. It can hold us captive in “what has always been” and prevent us from regaining our relevance in a world that threatens to leave us behind in the absolutes and “forevers” of our past. Because we have never known anything other than a world divided into spirit and matter, with all the sacred and secular, holy and unholy, worldly and otherworldly categories flowing from this division, we can fear that our very faith will disappear in the holistic perspective offered us today. Like Einstein, who for a long time could not face his own discoveries and, in fact, tried to hide them, “we can choose to fudge our own equations, living in one world while praying in another. Or we can endeavor to reconcile science and faith within ourselves, allowing them not only a peaceful coexistence but a mutual resonance that permits us to live a life filled with radical amazement” (Cannato, 36).

Today’s Vocations

At a recent convention of Retreats International the question was raised how retreat centers might attract the young of today. The answer that most impressed me was that we should stop trying to bring them to us, but rather go find them where they are—in malls, someone suggested later, a storefront place that invites them to stop in and welcomes them in between their business. Let me suggest here that what retreat centers are struggling with, religious congregations and dioceses struggle with today as well.
It is my sense that, with the influences today of NASA and its probes into the cosmos, with science fiction that is becoming less and less fictional, with books on “Vibrational Medicine” (Gerber) and “The Quantum Self” (Zohar), with Healing Touch, Pranic Healing, and Reiki, with tests demonstrating animal ESP and plant consciousness, and most of all with a generally broader and healthier attitude toward human embodiment and sexuality, those growing up in today’s world find themselves already thoroughly imbued with the emerging worldview and its interpretation of how things are. They may not be able to articulate the laws of physics and biology that support the changed view of reality in which they find themselves, but its approach to interconnectedness, to mutuality with its extraordinary effects, to change, and to chaos has, I believe, already become part of them. They see with its eyes and judge the world out of its perspective. They look for depth and meaning there as well, and for the God of today. The God they look for does not call from beyond anymore. The God they connect with is interpenetrating and inclusive of all. The God of today eschews elitism—the sacred few—and embraces all creation. The God who speaks to them is a God within as well as all around them, addressing their deepest longing, speaking from within the very culture emerging today, calling out of the depths of the universe to which we all belong.

Religious organizations wishing to further the experience of call, today, need to recognize this and adjust their expectations and requirements accordingly. What may help us in this adjustment is, perhaps, an honest look at our own transformation and the realization that we too are experiencing a change in our worldview and a concomitant change in our God-view and in our understanding of vocation. Few religious I know are here today for the same reasons for which they entered religious life. We have struggled with much of what we once accepted as beyond question. We have struggled with our own experiences that could no longer fit into the theological and moral categories of the past, and we have grown. We are fewer today, and we need each other in a deeper sense than before. We see call as ongoing and are drawn toward a daily recommitment rooted in the urgencies of the moment that challenge all notions of sameness and undaunted perpetuity.

**Expanding Our View of Call**

The hallmarks of commitment to call, as I see them for our time, though they apply to religious vocations to be sure, can expand also beyond them to the Christian community as a whole:
1. An emphasis today on personal integrity and communal solidarity that cannot be separated from a deep interior life;

2. The need for commitment to a cause which, for religious congregations, is intimately linked to the charism of the community and exemplified in the passionate concern of its founder to be about the mission of Jesus;

3. A burning desire to be about justice and about the transformation of oppressive structures;

4. The conviction that personal growth and maturation are essential for loyalty to a cause and attentive listening to call.

5. The recognition that community—the love of those with whom I stand around a common vision—is essential for the strength I need to keep saying “Yes”;

6. Reverence for the divine permeating all of creation and flowing, therefore, through me as harbinger of the light and love that is God in our midst;

7. A love and acceptance of humankind: all of it, without exception—blessed and broken, and on the way back into the Heart of God.

A true understanding of the maturation process will make it clear that the interiority asked for in hallmark 1 is not attained at will, but develops rather over the years and through the “agonies” of life. There is something realistic about religious vocations today frequently experienced later in life.

Hallmarks 2 and 3 are, in my estimation, primary to all ministry. Hallmark 3 speaks unequivocally to the essence of the Christian life. There is no option here for any of us. We were baptized into its fire. Hallmark 2 characterizes more specifically the form religious congregations give to hallmark 3. It speaks to that facet of the diamond that is God’s reign to which a particular group commits itself, and to which an individual feels drawn. As Paul tells us: There are different gifts, but the same spirit—the education of poor women and girls, for one group, the dedication to healing the sick, especially the poor, for another.

Hallmark 4, far from pointing to individualism (as interest in furthering one’s own growth may have been interpreted in times past) recognizes that nothing happens anywhere in the universe that does not affect everything everywhere instantly. Our personal maturation is never merely for ourselves, but affects the entire human and cosmic community. Culpable immaturity, like culpable ignorance, is shameful and harmful to all. In the light of this hallmark, religious organizations need to commit themselves to mature modes of interaction that honor the gifts and contributions each member brings, and that empower rather than control the members.

Hallmark 5 seems, by its own admission, to attract many of our younger members to religious life. It would seem to me, however, that for the sake of honesty, one needs to draw a distinction here between what is known as “the common life”
and requires individual members of a congregation to live together under a common roof, and the deeper and perhaps more elusive understanding of “community” that focuses on personal responsibility, shared vision, and mission. Though the common life and community can happen together and often do, a mandated connection of the two based on unrealistic expectations that ignore incompatibility on numerous levels of personality can bring with it much unnecessary suffering often based (sometimes unconsciously) on the misleading assumption that religious life can provide what one’s family of origin could not or did not.

Hallmarks 6 and 7 speak to the underlying energy that motivates all vocations and shines through all those, vowed or not, genuinely committed to God’s reign. It is clear that the love of God is manifest through human love and the care and concern for one’s neighbor. It is, therefore, embodied through us. In this sense, incarnation is an essential feature of all authentic and wholesome human experiences. From the beginning, vocations to religious life addressed their witnessing to divine love through the charism and works of their congregation. It was symbolized, specifically, by the vow of celibacy.

**The Call to Celibacy**

Today, however, it may be necessary to be particularly sensitive regarding this symbol, and to avoid the triumphalism so often connected with it in the past. The call to the vowed life particularizes the universal vocation to be about God’s reign of love that is expressed for others in other but equally holy ways. Answering this call is a response to God’s gift within the context of one’s life experience. From my perspective, the call to celibacy needs special consideration here. It is my growing conviction that, if truly experienced, this call need not necessarily be seen as the same call that attracts a person to the charism of a particular congregation and to membership around Gospel values. The ancient bridal imagery and radical view of “white martyrdom” associated with the vow of celibacy (Cozzens, 100), comparing it to the red martyrdom of Christians persecuted in the early days of the church, no longer, I believe, speaks meaningfully to the essence of a religious vocation today. For Donald Cozzens, however, “Celibacy . . . remains a neuralgic issue because it has come to be linked to the ideal of radical fidelity to the gospel” (Cozzens, 99), to the exclusion of other ways of life, and it continues to be understood that way by many. There is, as we know today, no evidence that either the New Testament or the first millennium of the church identified radical fidelity to God’s reign with celibacy (Cozzens, 101). “Radical commitment to Christ and his gospel remains the challenge of all who are baptized into the communion of the church.” All are called to “bear witness in accord with the charism and ministries entrusted to them” (Cozzens, 101, 102), and the celibate life does not rank higher than other ways of life in its response to this call.

Elsewhere I have discussed at length how, in the light of the above observations, I understand the “why” of celibacy within the context of our time (Fiand, 1996,
There is no doubt in my mind that celibacy is a legitimate call, and that the ones so called experience it as grace. I do not believe, however, that it is, or needs to be, a call to many. To assume this call, therefore, for a particular state of life such as a religious vocation and, accordingly, to mandate it as a discipline for all, seems to me rather presumptuous as well as counterproductive. “The harvest is plenty but the laborers are few” in most religious congregations. Perhaps we need to question whether (a) given our present-day deepening understanding of the sacredness of all creation and of human sexuality in particular and, (b) given an ever-growing awareness of the universal call to Gospel justice and commitment to God’s reign, the day might not be upon us when membership, energized by the particular charism of religious congregations, can move beyond the expected discipline of celibacy and allow for alternate forms of belonging. Hallmark 5 indirectly suggests this and invites us to broaden our view beyond the three vows presently identifying religious life. Might not the low numbers of applicants to religious life reveal a serious “disconnect” between what our life offers, and what those willing to serve feel called to? The old values of permanence, of celibacy, of poverty as holy dependence, and of obedience as unquestioning acquiescence all mitigate against a mature understanding of call today and prevent new, creative, and consciously claimed models of service as well as a serious, openly articulated reconsideration of lifestyle to emerge.

A Twenty-First-Century Model

Religious life for the twenty-first century, as I envision it, will look very different from what I committed myself to as a teenager in the late fifties. Let me, in conclusion and for the sake of discussion, share here my hopes:

• Religious of the future will be men and women who are drawn together because of a call to give their lives for a particular cause that is directly related to the justice agenda of the Gospel, to the reign of God.

• They will be drawn together because being in covenant with others who are about the same concern gives them strength and courage.

• Their understanding of community, therefore, will not primarily be based on a concern about living together—the common life, but on a desire to stand for a cause and to feel the support of others who love them, whom they love, and who share their goals. Some will live together, others will not, but will be connected, nevertheless, in numerous ways for the sake of mutual support.

• They will support each other financially, through prayer, and through whatever resources are available to them. Professionals, for example, could give their various services to the common cause.

• Their lifestyle will be one of simplicity, since they will have committed themselves to do with less until everyone has enough. Other than the choice of

121–33).
simplicity and charity, there will not be one fixed way to live (i.e., in a convent or priory). Diversity will be according to need and preference.

• Some groups will consist of one gender. Others will comprise both genders. Within any religious community some will be celibates by call, others will not. When they are not, both partners will not necessarily have to be members of the same religious community.

• Membership, privileges, and duties will vary according to involvement. For example, there may be permanently committed members and also those committed simply for a number of years or for one year at a time. In case of temporary membership, the need for involvement will correspond to the nature of the commitment. There may, for example, be no need for concern with retirement payments and responsibilities, or with voting on congregational policies about retirement.

• Each member will share financially according to his or her capacity. Sharing will be for the sake of the mission and for the support of aging members. The covenant that members have with one another will stipulate the support of those who may be involved in works of charity that do not draw remuneration. The objective will be about the transformation of unjust structures, and this may require some to go where other persons who are not supported by a congregation cannot go. In all cases, members will see themselves responsible for each other and will need to be apprised of the works of the congregation, so that their commitment and dedication is nourished.

• Discernment is an essential characteristic of any group gathered in the name of Jesus. We do not know what the will of God is in any particular situation, except that it is always about the doing of justice. Together and regularly members will discern whether the works they are engaged in collectively and as individuals are what God asks of them.

• Communities will be marked by solidarity with the oppressed, a passion for God’s reign, integrity of loving relationships built on respect, support, care, and on modeling the vision of Jesus.

Should the challenge arise to describe the community’s uniqueness and its specific difference from other Christians, the emphasis will be on the strength of the group commitment, its unity in a common quest, its energy around the particular charism of the group, its mutual support. As religious we will stand together with a vision of a more just society for the sake of the transformation of all things in Christ.

When dealing with the question of identity, the emerging worldview is putting its emphasis on at-oneness and interconnectedness rather than on the importance of distinctions. Since the whole is in each part and calls all the parts beyond
themselves in a continuous quest toward self-transcendence, mutuality rather than
distinctions and separation is prized. Religious of the future need to be models
here. This is the meaning of true community. The new is upon us. It is ours to
seize.

References


