RELIGIOUS LIFE POST VATICAN COUNCIL II

Thus, the state which is constituted by the profession of the evangelical counsels, . . . nevertheless, undeniably belongs to (the Church’s) life and holiness. Lumen Gentium, Chapter 6, #44.

At the direction of the Holy Father and guided by the above statement from Lumen Gentium, the dogmatic constitution on the Church, Women and Men in Consecrated Life responded to the call to renew their congregations after the Second Vatican Council. The statement declared that Religious Life was not just “window dressing,” but was intrinsic to the life of the Church. Religious were urged, first, to return to their charism, that unique gift of God given to their Founders and Foundresses; second, to assess the “signs of the times” of the contemporary world to discern where the kingdom of God needed to be proclaimed, and finally to respond to those needs in light of that original gift.

Consecrated Life, at that point in time, often experienced an adaption from the original purpose to meet certain needs, often determined by local bishops. This orientation focused the ministry of religious primarily on education, healthcare and social services like orphanages. In the United States this adaptation usually came about as Catholic immigrants, often poor and uneducated, became absorbed into American culture. The need of the Church at that time was to support, organize and care for the immigrants so as to safeguard their commitment to their faith and to its expression.

Some religious found that their charism had changed as they were obliged to become primarily teaching or nursing communities. With the call of the Holy Father to return to their roots, Sisters and Brothers began to leave the classrooms where dedicated, formed Catholic lay teachers took over and using their educational and administrative skills began to serve in pastoral ministry, community organizing or advocacy for the poor. Religious saw that their Catholic hospitals were not just to give good medical care, but to care for the poorest of the poor, the new immigrants, and those who fell between the cracks of American society. Consequently some religious left the hospital corridors to go to the margins of society looking to serve those in need.

Communities began to allow their Sisters and Brothers to discern where each individual’s God-given gifts met the needs of God’s people, and subsequently freed them to respond in new and different ways that more fully reflected the original charism. Like the small bands of religious who attended to all the wounded as nurses on the Civil War battlefields serving, or who taught the faith to children in rough and tumble frontier towns, or who took in orphans during cholera or flu epidemics, Sisters and Brothers looked to where the Kingdom of God needed to be proclaimed.

Many Religious Sisters and Brothers, true to the Church and faithful to the promptings of the Holy Spirit within themselves and their communities, today look and minister differently than they did in the recent past. But for many of them, their Founders and Foundresses would easily recognize the charism that had set their own hearts on fire and caused them to step into the unknown. And Religious congregations being founded today are also following the promptings of the Holy Spirit and are as faithfully discerning how their founding charism addresses the needs of today’s world and how it will take them into the future. Just as there are many charisms needed in the church to proclaim God’s unconditional love, there is room in the Church for monastic contemplatives and for a variety of active, apostolic contemplatives to serve God’s people. Each manifests an aspect of the Face of God; each is blessed with a gift of the Spirit that “undeniably belongs to (the Church’s) life and holiness.”

Joyce Lehman, CPPS