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## Tasks of those who choose the prophetic life style

by Sandra Schneiders



*This is the fourth part of a five-part essay by Immaculate Heart of Mary Sr. Sandra Schneiders on the meaning of religious life today. In this part Schneiders, professor of New Testament Studies and Christian Spirituality at the Jesuit School of Theology at Berkeley, explores the tasks of those who choose to live a prophetic life, in her essay "Religious Life as Prophetic Life Form." These essays run from Jan. 4 through Jan. 8.*

### Religious Life as a Prophetic Life Form

#### *Crucial Distinctions*

Religious Life has been called a prophetic life form both in official documents and in spiritual writing almost since its inception. The meaning of this affirmation, however, is often unrealistically romanticized or left so piously vague as to be useless. In the current situation in which the nature of ministerial religious life as a prophetic life form in the Church is in public contention it would be helpful for us, as a church in general and as religious in particular, to clarify the meaning of this affirmation.

First, it is the life form, not the individual religious, that is characterized as "prophetic." Just as entrance into an enclosed monastic community (often called a "contemplative order") does not make one a contemplative, and there are many genuine contemplatives who do not enter monasteries, so entering religious Life does not make one a prophet and there are many prophetic figures who do not enter

religious Life. However, different life forms in the Church offer corporate witness (corporate as in "organic," not as in "corporation") to particular dimensions of Christian life in which all the baptized are called to participate. All are called to contemplation, to fidelity and fruitfulness, to prophetic witness. But certain life forms, such as enclosed monastic life, matrimony, or ministerial religious life raise one or another of these dimensions to particular visibility by their corporate living of this charism. So what follows makes no claims that all ministerial religious are prophets or that religious life has any monopoly on the charism of prophecy in the Church.

However, the life form as corporate witness to the charism of prophecy does (or should) explicitly challenge its individual members to the exercise of this charism and empower, support, and promote their fidelity to this charism. The felt call to prophetic ministry and the gifts of spirit, mind, and heart for the exercise of such ministry, therefore, should be factors in discerning a vocation to religious life.

At certain times in its history, religious life has been so caught up in a hyper-institutionalized and over-clericalized understanding of Church and ministry, and of itself in that framework, that many Congregations lost sight of this vocational criterion. They preferred candidates who were compliant and docile. The less experienced and competent, the more girlishly romantic about their calling, that they were at entrance, the better, since they were more easily "formed" for submission. Most congregations today prefer candidates who have a sturdy sense of self developed through education and work experience and sufficient maturity to live and work well outside a "total institution" environment. Such candidates are more likely to grow into a truly prophetic ministerial identity and spirituality.

Second, some can be tempted to label "prophetic" any kind of protest that is extreme, conspicuous, or stubborn, or to claim the title of "prophet" for anyone whose ideas or behavior are questioned by authority, no matter how reasonably. The truly prophetic are typically very reluctant to call themselves prophets. They know well their fear in the face of conflict and the high cost of putting themselves in the line of fire of angry officials. Furthermore, they recognize the need to receive seriously and incorporate responsibly institutional authority's positions and concerns into any discernment that influences other people, in or outside the Church. Again, discerning between the genuinely prophetic stance and mob fanaticism, between courage and arrogance can be very difficult. It requires prayer, communal consultation, testing, and a humble willingness to consider seriously all reasonable and respectful disagreement with one's position.

### *The Inaugural Vision or Prophetic Call*

Religious life begins, both corporately and individually, in an experience analogous to the inaugural vision of the Old Testament prophets and of Jesus himself. Although the literary form of the biblical narratives of prophetic calls convey the substance but not necessarily the historical details of these experiences, all these texts indicate that the prophetic vocation is not undertaken on one's own initiative. Nor is one appointed to it by human beings. The call comes from God, often to one who feels frightened, unworthy, or incompetent. Even Jesus is clearly sobered by the dimensions and evident dangers of the life to which he is called. God's call to him is powerful and compelling, but Satan's opposition is both real and dangerous.

Religious orders begin, typically, in the charismatic experience of one or more founders who feel impelled to give themselves to God and God's work, almost always in response to some historically pressing need. Subsequent members respond to a personal call to join the founders in this divinely-originated enterprise. The ensuing process of mutual discernment for later candidates is designed to test the "fit" between the prospective member, the foundational charism, and the historical shape that the order has taken since its founding.

Religious orders, then, are not the creations of the ecclesiastical institution (although it makes certain regulatory provisions regarding the living of the life, approves rules, and exercises some supervisory or protective functions in regard to approved institutes [L.G. VI, 45]), any more than the Old Testament prophets were appointed by Israel's kings or priests or Jesus by the Temple officials. In fact, those who functioned as "court prophets," who "worked for" the king or priests by telling them what they wanted to hear or leading the people to submit to their rulers when God spoke differently through the true prophets or "the signs of the times," were quintessentially "false prophets."

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Religious Life, then, is a charismatic life form, called into existence by the Holy Spirit, to live corporately the prophetic charism in the Church. It is not a work force gathering recruits for ecclesiastical projects and it does not receive its mission nor the particular ministries of its members from the hierarchy. Congregations, in the exercise of particular ministries within dioceses or parishes, are bound by the applicable local directives and must work collaboratively with the ordained leadership. But this does not put the Congregation or its members "under" the bishop or clergy. This is especially true of "exempt" Congregations which minister across ecclesiastical boundaries.

When members of the hierarchy get panicky about the decline in numbers of religious they reveal a serious misunderstanding of the nature of the life. No Congregation "needs" more members than are actually called to it by God. There is no optimal or minimum size for orders or length of their lifespan. Some orders have never had more than a few dozen members and others have thousands. Some are centuries old and others have had a very brief history. The purpose of the life is not to perpetuate particular Congregations nor to staff Church institutions; it is to live intensely the witness to the Gospel to which the Congregation is called and for as long as it is so called. As long as an order and its members are able to live religious life according to its own founding charism and approved constitutions intrusion by ecclesiastical authority into its internal affairs is not only unwarranted; it is unjustifiable and counter-productive (see e.g., Canon 586).

## *The Prophetic Task*

As we have already seen, the distinguishing mark of the prophetic vocation among the various ministries of the Word in the Church (e.g., apostleship, evangelization, preaching, teaching, etc.) is its task of focusing the Word, the proclamation of the Reign of God, directly on and in a particular situation. Prophetic witness involves discerning and responding to what the Council, following Jesus, called "the signs of the times" (Mt. 16:3). So, the prophet is not simply announcing the Gospel in general or explaining doctrines in the abstract.

This is why, historically, most orders speak of being "founded for" a particular ministry such as education or helping the poor. They are not actually founded to do a particular work such as "to teach in parochial schools." One does not have to become a religious in order to be a Catholic school teacher or social worker. But a particular situation demanding the proclamation of the Reign of God here and now gave rise to a question like, "What does the Gospel of the Reign of God mean, call for, demand, need in this situation of desperate ignorance or widespread poverty?"

Over time this charism of bearing prophetic witness in the sphere of education, for example, may evolve into addressing all kinds of ignorance (intellectual, moral, political, spiritual, etc.) caused by all kind of factors (poverty, discrimination, lack of pastoral care, etc.) in all kinds of different situations (schools,

inner city agencies, RCIA programs, environmental projects, spiritual life centers, etc). But the question giving rise to the particular order is always contextually concrete and can never be answered once and for all or in general. Thus, ministerial innovation by a religious congregation is not instability or infidelity to its originating charism. Such innovation belongs to the nature of the vocation as prophetic rather than institutional.

It is precisely because the prophet is addressing the actual situation, publicly lamenting current oppression as contrary to God's will, and energizing real people to imagine and begin to strive for an alternate future, that the prophet is often perceived as dangerous to the status quo. The "powers that be," political, economic, religious, ecclesiastical, are powerful precisely because of their position within the current system. They are the agents and beneficiaries of that system. When that system is oppressive the prophet, by encouraging the system's victims toward liberation, is necessarily, and will be perceived by authority, as subversive of the status quo.

Furthermore, the prophet is not simply a political organizer or a humanitarian benefactor but is announcing the Reign of God, good news to the poor. This good news is not "pie in the sky bye and bye," consolation after death for those who patiently bear irremediable misery in this life. It is "release to captives," "freedom to the oppressed," a new state of affairs, here and now, in which domination, exclusion, stigma, discrimination, oppression of all kinds by state and Church is overcome. The prophet is acting out the universal compassion of God by practicing and empowering people to a practice of justice that will make God's compassion the normal state of affairs, God's reign on earth as it is in heaven.

Finally, the prophet is sent by God to proclaim by word and work the coming of the Reign of God in the here and now. The prophet in Israel, including Jesus, was not a priest, elder, rabbi, scribe, Pharisee, or other official. The religious today, as religious, is not ordained, not a part of the hierarchical structure of the Church (see *Lumen Gentium* VI, 43, and elsewhere). [Some male religious are ordained and this creates particular challenges for them that, fortunately, sisters and brothers who are simply religious do not have to deal with and which are beyond the scope of this essay.] This non-clerical status of religious has extremely important implications for their prophetic ministry of which many in the Church are unaware or about which they are ill-informed.

At ordination the cleric makes a promise of obedience to his ecclesiastical superior which binds him to obey that superior (and his successors) in relation to the exercise of his office in the Church. None of this is true of religious. Religious make their vows to God (not to their superiors or Church officials) to live religious life (not to exercise some particular function, office, or ministry). Living religious life includes the obligations of lifelong profession of the vows. But religious make their vows according to the constitutions of their order (which includes a particular relationship to Church law), in the presence of their superiors, but only to God.

In the concrete, this means that religious, unlike the clergy, are not agents of the institutional Church as Jesus was not an agent of institutional Judaism. Although, as members of the Church, they are subject to Church authority when it is legitimately exercised, it is not their "job" or responsibility as religious to teach, defend, or enforce Church teaching, law, or policy. Because they make public vows (as do married people) religious are "public persons" in the Church which means they are bound by canon law in relation to the obligations of their state of life. Religious (like any non-cleric), may exercise a ministry, e.g., teaching in the RCIA program, which obliges them to correctly represent, in their official ministerial capacity, the teaching and discipline of the magisterium. But this obligation arises from the particular ministry they are exercising, not from their state of life in the Church.

There has been a long history of practical, but theologically and juridically unfounded, assimilation of

non-ordained religious into the hierarchical (or office) structure of the Church. Many Catholics think that that structure includes Pope, cardinals, bishops, priests, religious (in that order), as distinguished from the laity and, therefore, that religious function as low-level officials or quasi-clerics (without authority or power, of course!) of the institutional Church. Often enough their prophetic vocation, however, leads them, as it led Jesus in his dealing with the woman taken in adultery or with the "unclean" he was legally obliged to avoid, to help people deal with situations in their cultural, spiritual, or religious lives for which current law or teaching is inadequate.

Charges of disobedience, unlawful dissent, and so on, are misplaced in such cases. All members of the Church owe respect and accurate representation to official ecclesiastical positions. But not all members of the Church are charged with suppressing thought or dialogue on these subjects (in themselves or others), with enforcing Church law, or with punishing those whose personal situations are more complicated than the law can handle.

Jesus knew and respected the Law and the official teachings of Judaism. Often he even taught them (see e.g., Mt. 5:17; 7:12; Lk. 10:25-28; 20:26). But sometimes he gave priority to other equally valid and important considerations such as the suffering of individuals, the inequity of human laws, the fallibility of human interpretation of God's will even on the part of officials. This is an important difference between the ecclesiastical official whose primary duty as an official is to the institution and the prophet whose first duty is facilitating the integration of a concrete situation into the context of the Reign of God. This does not mean that an ecclesiastical official might not be called, at times, to prefer a person to the law or that a prophet might not be called, at times, to vigorously defend an official position. But it does suggest that prophets, in our case religious, cannot be defined as or reduced to "Temple police." They are not an enforcement agency for the hierarchy's teaching or practice.

This is particularly important in situations which touch deeply into the lives of good people trying to live conscientiously and in which the teaching authority of the hierarchy (the magisterium) has not been able to "make its case" to the Church as the People of God. In such cases, there is genuine (even if forbidden and condemned) pluralism of belief and behavior, and even actual valid (even if forbidden and condemned) dissent in the Church.

Church teaching, to be considered authoritative, must be not only "promulgated" (announced and adequately explained) but also "received" (accepted by the believing Church). *Humanae Vitae*, for example, promulgated the official position that every act of "artificial" (that is, non-spontaneous) contraception is intrinsically a serious moral evil. Not only did this teaching contradict the conclusions of the papally appointed commission of competent consultants who studied the question in depth, but also neither the clergy who were to teach and enforce this position nor the married people whose lives were intimately affected by this teaching, have accepted it. The vast majority of faithful Catholic couples use contraception according to their well-formed consciences to regulate the role of reproduction in their families and most pastors make no effort to stop this practice or punish it.

Similar cases of non-reception affect the official teaching concerning the "impossibility" of ordaining women, the "intrinsically disordered" character of homosexuality, the "grave deficiency" of non-Catholic and especially non-Christian religious traditions, the sinfulness of using condoms to prevent the spread of AIDS between spouses, to name only a few "hot button" issues. In these cases the majority of Catholics, including laity, theologians, many pastors, and even some bishops believe that these teachings need revision. In the meantime, ministers, among whom are many religious, must help people of good will figure out what to do in morally impossible situations.

Insistence that religious must argue against their own theologically well-grounded judgment, mature

experience, and pastoral sensibilities to enforce teachings and policies which the hierarchy itself cannot defend credibly enough to persuade the majority of the Church's members and cannot actually enforce is a cooptation of the prophetic ministry of religious for institutional purposes. It is a cooptation which religious not only may but must resist.

The wide-spread, consistent, compassionate ministry of religious to those suffering from these tensions between the magisterium and the faith convictions of the majority of the People of God often focuses negative hierarchical attention on individual religious and their Congregations as did Jesus' welcoming sinners and eating with them, breaking purity laws, violating the Sabbath, and releasing the woman taken in adultery. The ministry of religious to people suffering insoluble conflicts of conscience or caught in impossible life situations, is not rebellion or insubordination but a carefully discerned and courageous fidelity to their primary ministerial vocation: to mediate the good news of God's compassion and justice to people in concrete conditions.

Two final implications of the fact that religious are sent by God and are not, corporately or individually, agents of the institutional Church is that, contrary to what some members of the hierarchy wish were the case, their ministry is not necessarily limited to Catholics or Catholic institutions nor necessarily aimed at sacramental incorporation into the Roman Catholic Church of those to whom they minister. In other words, neither working in Catholic institutions nor conversion of people to Roman Catholicism (which the Council recognized is not identical with the Reign of God) is necessarily the primary vocation of religious as ministers. The prophetic vocation is to witness by word and work to the Reign of God.

Just as Jesus was deeply rooted in his Jewish identity and community, Religious are deeply rooted in Catholicism as faith tradition and as institutionally organized community. The fundamental "place" of religious, personally and ministerially, is the Church as the People of God but also as institution with all its sins, scandals, corruption, and violence. Institutional Judaism of the first century was little better, but Jesus never abandoned it, theoretically or practically. And as the ancient prophets and Jesus were sent to Israel to recall it to fidelity to the covenant so that Israel could actually fulfill its vocation to be a "light to the nations," the primary addressee of religious, corporately and individually, is the Church itself, both its leadership and its members (including themselves as Congregations and individuals). However, they are not called as part of the hierarchy to act as agents of the institution but as prophets among the People of God.

Nevertheless, Jesus was drawn beyond his initial understanding of himself as sent "only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" to inclusion in his ministry of pagans (e.g., Mt. 15:22-28) and Samaritans (Jn 4:1-42). He did not seem to feel obliged to convert these people to Judaism in order to proclaim the Reign of God to them.

Traditional Catholics over the age of 50 or 60 (to say nothing of many Church officials) might find it hard to imagine "real Sisters" anywhere outside a Catholic institution taking care of Catholics and/or trying to convert non-Catholics. But anyone who has seen the superb traveling museum exhibit "Women and Spirit," which the LCWR has mounted to present the history of women religious in the United States since they first arrived in the 1700's, will be aware that the 1950s type of religious life, for which some people nostalgically pine, is actually a relatively recent, short-lived, and somewhat anomalous phenomenon. It parallels the striking, but also anomalous, massive influx of new vocations to religious life in the same period. In fact, twentieth century American women in 18th century European garb moving sedately in pairs from school to nearby convent and back, hands hidden demurely in sleeves or scapular, working quietly under the close supervision of the clergy, and relating to "seculars" with quaint Victorian gentility bore very little resemblance to their pioneer forebears.

As women's ministerial religious Life in the new world gradually emerged from its largely cloistered origins in Europe, and scores of new Congregations were founded in the new world, the prophetic character of this life was clearly manifest. For the first hundred-plus years at least, the non-cloistered women religious in this country were most often frontier pioneers ministering in the most diverse and arduous settings imaginable to whoever needed their help.

These religious lived in log cabins or whatever other shelter was available and wore what they had brought with them or could find or make. They braved the bitter winters of the great plains and the scorching heat of the southwest, cutting their way through woods into rural environments and mountain "hollers." In small groups or alone they criss-crossed the country, over its mountains and across its deserts and up its waterways, by boat, covered wagon, on horseback, by steam engine, and on foot. They nursed on the battlefields, on shipboard, and among the victims of epidemics. They founded schools for native Americans, Blacks, and the Appalachian poor and were admitting to their schools and hospitals people of color well before it was legal. They ministered to soldiers and miners and railway workers, to women of "ill repute" and addicts and criminals, and to the orphans whom such populations inevitably leave in their wake. And they rarely discriminated between Catholics and non-Catholics.

In short, their life and ministry was deeply rooted in the Church but not confined to institutions, Catholic or otherwise, nor restricted to their co-religionists, nor aimed in the first instance at conversion. These early American religious were not an under-developed species awaiting proper institutionalization. They were outstanding exemplars of genuine ministerial religious Life exercising their prophetic vocation of proclaiming the Reign of God in the unprecedented and challenging frontier context.

When the great wave of immigrants from Catholic countries hit the American shore, beginning in the 1820's and increasing steadily through the turn of the century, the Church geared up to serve, and preserve in the faith, these Catholics who were often unwelcome among the established white Protestant and Anglican majority. The Catholic "ghetto," organized around the parish church, depended heavily on women religious who became, in the eyes of many, the primary representatives of the institutional Church, often outnumbering the local clergy. They founded and staffed the Catholic institutions which were the primary life-support systems of these early U.S. Catholic communities. In that context, institutions were what was needed for the ongoing proclamation of the Reign of God among the immigrants.

Virtually all religious were soon living in convents and working in Catholic institutions where they were a kind of service extension of the clergy. The latter defined the apostolates of these women and controlled both the work and the religious themselves, often well beyond the scope of their legitimate authority which, in any case, was ill-defined. If ever there was a situation of "might makes right" the relation of the clergy to women religious was it.

This was a period of rapid numerical growth for religious congregations which attracted large numbers of the young girls of immigrant families for whom they cared. And as the numbers of recruits increased large motherhouses and novitiates multiplied, as did the institutions in which the religious ministered.

During this period religious life was rapidly institutionalized and domesticated. Though religious exercised remarkable creativity and zeal in the development, staffing, and administration of the institutions they served they also became a "standardized" work force supplying free labor for clerical authorities who suppressed any unapproved initiative of the women and who owned not only most of the institutions in which Sisters served but also the local houses in which they lived and most other resources upon which they depended.

By the early 1900s women's apostolic religious Life was thoroughly institutionalized and standardized, and, unfortunately, largely domesticated -- but also highly successful within a narrow niche which some later labeled, unkindly but not entirely inaccurately, as that of "Father's helpers." This is the image of apostolic religious familiar from "The Bells of St. Mary's," the idealized and venerated "good Sisters" that many Catholics remember from their pre-conciliar experience. This type of religious Life, the hybrid of semi-cloistered monastic life joined to clerically-controlled institutionalized apostolic works, was not actually "traditional" or "normative" for ministerial religious. It was the product of a particular social situation, the ghettoized immigrant Catholic Church in the U.S. in the mid-1800's to mid-1900's.

The cultural and economic mainstreaming of Catholics, which was well underway by the end of World War II, was officially "accomplished" with the election of John F. Kennedy to the presidency in 1960. With economic and political mainstreaming came the dissolution, for many reasons, of the Catholic parish as religious, social, and cultural ghetto. This sociological revolution, the end of the massive influx of girls from minority ethnic groups into the convent, and the cultural and social tidal waves of the 1960s combined with the renewal of the Second Vatican Council to profoundly change the highly institutionalized religious life that had become standard by the first half of the 20th century. Contemporary ministerial religious life, which emerged from this upheaval in the world and the Church, actually looks more like the early ministerial religious life of the late 17th and 18th centuries in Europe and the 18th and early-19th centuries in the New World!

### **The Prophetic Life: Religious Life in the Church Today**

In this final section I want to discuss the three major changes that the post-conciliar renewal brought about in the living of their prophetic vocation by ministerial religious and why they were and remain so problematic for some conservative Catholics, traditionalist religious, and the hierarchy. I hope it will become clear why this tension is so often framed in terms of "obedience," as was the objection to the prophetic ministry of Jesus and especially that of his disciples immediately after his execution. This will bring us back to our opening question: what is the deep issue that is at stake in the current investigation of ministerial religious?

**Lifestyle:** As a combination of sociological factors in American life and the conciliar developments in the Catholic church propelled religious out of the "total institution" lifestyle of the standardization period and into a renewed sense of their vocation to ministry they made a number of lifestyle changes, e.g., in regard to habit, housing, and horarium. These developments were important, in fact necessary, for their ministerial life. However, the reaction to them on the part of the hierarchy and traditionalist Catholics (religious and lay) was completely out of proportion to their theological significance. When the investigation was launched in 2009, however, many people wondered whether the Vatican was trying to "rein in" religious who had "gone too far" or gotten "out of control." And others, even people not especially familiar with religious Life, quickly suggested an analogy between the Vatican investigation and the Taliban: that the investigation was simply a patriarchal crack-down on women's autonomy. These observers might have been more astute than even religious realized!

Religious were certainly not "out of control" but they had, perhaps without particularly attending to it, matured out of patriarchal control in highly symbolic ways. The right of religiously empowered males to control women even, and perhaps especially, in the minute and personal details of their lives -- what they may (and may not) wear, where and with whom and how they must live, what education and employment is permitted them, to which males they must be accountable, and whose permission is required for any modification of their lives, etc. is critical to patriarchal control. And in religiously-based societies patriarchal control is intrinsic to hierarchical control.



As religious adjusted their lifestyles to facilitate their expanded involvement in more diversified and individualized ministries they naturally took control of such lifestyle issues into their own hands. This had begun back in the 1950s with the Sister Formation Movement when religious superiors began to make decisions about the education and placement of their Sisters despite hierarchical claims to control of these matters. But it accelerated and touched more, and more visible, aspects of their daily lives in the wake of the Council.

A remarkable number of items on the Phase II questionnaire of the investigation bear upon details of the inner life of Congregations and even the personal life of individual Sisters which have nothing to do with "quality of life" but have everything to do with minute supervision of every moment and move of the women in question. Why such intrusive examination into the personal life of these women and their communities?

I would suggest that women religious -- being the only part of the female population of the Church to which the male hierarchy has verifiable access and over whom they have the ability to exercise direct coercive power -- must be kept under strict and publicly visible control lest the hierarchical power structure itself be called into question. Like Jesus "stirring up the people," women religious claiming even moderate personal and community autonomy from patriarchal control can seem subversive of hierarchy, or at least of the absolute monarchy version of such. The issue, once again, is cast in terms of "obedience." But the real issue is power. Even if nothing else in religious life had changed these developments in regard to lifestyle could well have precipitated the panic-reaction that launched the investigation.

**Community:** however there was something else, and at a deeper level. The stabilization period (mid-19th to mid-20th century) gave rise to a (mis)understanding of women's religious life which most Religious themselves and Church officials generally shared, namely, that religious life was structurally modeled on the hierarchical Church which was understood and functioned as a pyramidal divine right monarchy.

Of course, the superior at the pinnacle of the religious congregation's pyramid, even though elected by the members, actually received even her "ordinary" (i.e., office) authority by delegation from the ordained and operated always in dependence on and by permission of that authority. In that respect she differed from her analogues in the ecclesiastical hierarchy who held their ordinary authority by virtue of ordination. But, otherwise, the Congregation with General Superior, provincials, local superiors, and powerless "subjects" mirrored the hierarchical Church with Pope, bishops, priests, and powerless "laity." Each level's incumbents were, ideally, obedient (even blindly so) to those of the level above. There was little or no distinction between authority and coercive power.

Under the influence of the Gospel-based conciliar ecclesiology of the People of God combined with the theologically and culturally enlightened rethinking of religious life by Sisters themselves from the 1950's into the late 1960's, women religious simply stepped -- sideways as it were -- out of the pyramidal structure that had controlled their lives up to that point. They affirmed the fundamental equality of all members in a class- and caste-free community, opted for collegial government, and affirmed the profession-based rather than political character of their life together.

Obedience ceased to be understood as blind submission to divinely empowered, absolute, and non-accountable official "authorities." Rather, corporate obedience meant the full and free cooperation of all members of the community with congregational leaders and each other in co-responsibility for their life and mission. Individual obedience was an exercise in mutual discernment between the religious and her congregation's leadership.

Although religious themselves, in general, made this transition from divine right monarchy to a discipleship of equals with relative speed, though not without strenuous effort and much suffering -- perhaps because the new form was far more compatible with women's ways of doing things than was the quasi-military, autocratic procedures they had inherited from male authority -- the institutional Church's official leadership has never been comfortable with this development. The Vatican has struggled for decades against the egalitarianism, collegiality, team leadership models, binding consultation of members, dialogical procedures, discernment processes, practice of subsidiarity, and commitment to non-violent conflict resolution and a non-coercive exercise of authority that women religious have adopted.

Religious have respectfully but firmly resisted Vatican attempts to restore sacralized autocracy in their lives and communities. Blind obedience, within their Congregations or to Church officials, is no longer considered a virtue by these religious and very few, if any, Congregational leaders in renewed communities would think seriously of trying to demand it. know that "blind obedience" is not only theologically highly suspect (not just for religious but for any Christian) but that it does not work nearly as well as the communitarian form of government that has replaced it.

Religious, both by the contemplative prayer which grounds their life and by their free choice of and deepened appropriation of consecrated celibacy, evangelical poverty, and prophetic obedience, have reconstructed their lives to maximize their freedom from the kinds of influences and pressures -- from persons, possessions, and power (civil and ecclesiastical) -- that would tempt them to ignore or distort the voices that they are actually hearing, or prevent their seeing "the signs of the times" pointing to God's will in the present situation. Their way of living in community is highly conducive to the ministerial exercise of their prophetic vocation of focusing the Word of God in the concrete situations in which they minister. (For an engrossing account of one Congregation's amazing, but very typical, journey through this transformation, see Phyllis Kittel's fascinating oral history-based account, *Staying in the Fire*, 2009).

In effect, religious -- probably without consciously intending such a thing -- were subverting the domination system of the patriarchal Church by incarnating in their community life an alternative not only to patriarchy but to all forms of coercion-based exercise of power. This is a more serious challenge to an absolutist hierarchy than the challenge to its patriarchal control of women members because it is based in and incarnates an ecclesiology of equal discipleship in which no one is called rabbi or teacher or father because there is only one teacher, Christ, and one Parent, God, and all members of the community are sisters and brothers (see Mt. 23:8-11).

**Ministry:** Both lifestyle changes which challenged patriarchy and the development of collegial community life which incarnated *Lumen Gentium*, the conciliar ecclesiology of the Church as the People of God, made hierarchical authority very uneasy. However, both these developments were internal to Religious Life itself. Both raised the issue of obedience, the first of women to men and the second of laity to ordained. But as women Religious moved out of the collective institutional ministries in Catholic settings (schools, etc.) in which they had functioned for many decades and into highly diversified and individualized ministries in fields inside and outside the Church setting they unleashed a third unsettling force with which the hierarchy had to deal, namely, prophetic ministry. In this arena the issue of obedience became paramount.

Religious were now involved in the precarious business of trying to proclaim the Reign of God in concrete situations in which Church teaching, law, and policy often were not easy to communicate to people who were trying to form their consciences, make good moral decisions, choose the best option among a range of bad possibilities, or just stay alive when nothing was working for them. Teaching catechism to ten year olds in 1950 and helping a woman with five small children decide what to do about

a virtually certainly fatal pregnancy were simply not in the same category. Sisters were now ministering in prisons, with undocumented immigrants, in inner city shelters, on Capitol hill, in spirituality centers open to all faiths or none, with the homeless, with torture victims, with the dying who were alienated from the Church, and in myriad other situations in which there were no easy answers and the stakes for real people were as high as they were for the woman taken in adultery to whom Jesus proclaimed the Reign of God as compassion redefining justice.

The theological issue at the heart of this situation was that raised by *Gaudium et Spes*, namely, how does the Church of Jesus Christ understand and relate to the world? Is the Church a fortress of truth and moral righteousness in a sea of wickedness, charged with protecting her own from contamination while naming and condemning the evil of the surrounding culture -- an approach those over sixty will remember well? Or is the Church the suffering Body of Christ in solidarity with all that is human as real people, individually and as a race, struggle toward the light of the Resurrection? The ministerial choices of Religious in the aftermath of the Council were increasingly an affirmation of the latter. But this often placed prophetic ministers in tension with Church authority. This tension tended to be framed as a conundrum of obedience.

In a sense, the topic can be adumbrated by re-reading the episode in the Acts of the Apostles 5:19-42 in which Peter and his companions preach the Gospel of Jesus as the Christ and his inauguration of the Reign of God after being forbidden by the Temple hierarchy to do so:

The high priest questioned them, saying, 'We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and you are determined to bring this man's blood on us.' But Peter and the apostles answered, 'We must obey God rather than any human authority' (Acts 5:27-30).

All the elements of the conflict situation are here: the hierarchical order not to preach the Gospel because that preaching constituted a threat to the institutional status quo and its authorities and the disciples' response contrasting human (including hierarchical) authority with divine authority.

The disciples defended themselves not by claiming that the priests had no authority but simply by saying that, in a case of conflict between what God charged them to do in service of the Word and what even legitimate religious authority commanded them to do, they followed their consciences. They were flogged and again commanded to cease bearing witness to the paschal mystery. But they rejoiced to suffer for fulfilling their vocation and continued boldly to preach the Word in private and in public as Jesus had charged them and the Holy Spirit had empowered them to do. Hierarchical authority in the Church, as in the Sanhedrin, is real and legitimate but it is not absolute. As Paul said, there are many charisms in the Church and none of them simply usurps or controls all the others (see 1 Cor. 12).t

In the scene just evoked, Gamaliel, a Pharisee, addressed his fellows in the Sanhedrin with timelessly valid advice:

So in the present case, I tell you, keep away from these men [the disciples] and let them alone; because if this plan or this undertaking [their preaching of the Gospel] is of human origin, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them -- in that case you may even be found fighting against God!" (Acts 5:38-39)

The current conflicts between hierarchical authority and the exercise of their prophetic ministry by women Religious has been escalating since the institutional renewal of Religious Life began in the early 1970's. Implicit in the call of the Vatican Council to Religious to renew their lives for the sake of ministry in and to the world, which the Council itself had embraced in a new way, is a new understanding of their practice of obedience as rooted in the prophetic nature of Religious Life itself. Religious began to

embrace a call to ministry fully compatible with their vocation, indeed more compatible in many ways than the standardized institutional apostolates of the past century. They began to reclaim the specifically ministerial (but non-ordained) nature of their life which was, in effect, a reclaiming of its prophetic character.

This ministerial renewal has been, in many respects, more unsettling for the institutional authorities than the internal lifestyle and community renewal was, but for the same reasons. Religious were no longer as easily controllable by the clergy. They could no longer be "ordered up" as troops for institutional campaigns and "deployed where needed" by the hierarchy. Where once there had been twenty religious staffing one institution under the control of the local clergy, now there were one or two, ministering in many initiatives sometimes beyond the borders of Catholic institutions, and empowering in ministry groups of laity newly conscious of their own call to ministry.

Ecclesiastical authority, at least in the reigns of the last two Popes, often has been an exercise in the suppression of all voices except its own, branding as "dissent" (always understood as sinful disobedience rather than mature critical engagement) any position, and sometimes even the consideration of arguments for any position, at variance with "official teaching." Religious obedience, however, is precisely an exercise of a prophetic vocation calling its members to carefully discern the meaning of the Word of God in and for a particular situation. ttt

Here we see very clearly the point of tension, namely, two different understandings of obedience. The hierarchical definition of obedience is total and absolute submission in thought, word, and deed, interiorly and exteriorly, to office authority. Any deviation from this understanding constitutes dissent, which is always sinful, and if acted upon, is disobedience. The prophetic definition of obedience is the prayerful listening for the will of God in all relevant "voices" and the search for that will in the "signs of the times," followed by careful discernment and responsible speaking and acting out of that discernment for the good of real people in concrete situations. This may at times involve dissent, not as defiance or disobedience but as creative contribution to a fuller discernment of and obedience to the will of God in the present situation. Obedience, in other words is not about mindless submission; it is an explicit commitment to mindful discernment. If God's will coincided exactly, always, and exhaustively with the teaching or legislating of office holders, no discernment, of course, would be necessary or legitimate. But the example of Jesus makes it abundantly clear that this is not the case and no one is dispensed from the challenge of discernment, even when the teaching or law in question is derived from Scripture itself.

This has led to the kinds of tensions discussed above in which religious are no longer simply "channeling" official teaching or enforcing Church policy but ministering to people in concrete situations of suffering and struggle and having to help those people discern what God is doing in their lives and calling them to, which often enough cannot be fully identified with official teaching or policy.

Many lay people of all ages and conditions have emerged in the past few months bearing witness to the role women religious have played in sustaining their faith and often their Church affiliation through experiences of rejection, denial of the sacraments or Christian burial for their family members, excommunication, and public shaming at the hands of hierarchical authority defending and enforcing its teaching which it equated with God's will.

The outreach of religious to the socially marginalized and ecclesiastically alienated is not a matter of contradicting authority, any more than was Jesus' approach to the authorities who had arrested the woman taken in adultery. It is a matter of compassion, offered in the name of the God of the prodigal (who we all are), to suffering sisters and brothers of Jesus without conditioning that compassion on moral rectitude or theological orthodoxy. It is possible to say both "You are accepted and loved, unconditionally, just as you

are" and, when a person is strong enough to hear it, "Sin no more."

For the past four decades religious have been living into a new understanding of religious life itself involving a new understanding of their ministry as prophetic. This, in turn, has involved a new understanding of obedience. They have been living into the vision inaugurated by the Second Vatican Council of the Church as the People of God who are the ministerial Body of Christ in this world. And as they have lived into this reality themselves religious have been, for many, the most convincing corporate witness in the Church to the truth and power of the Conciliar vision of Christian identity and vocation. They have been calling the laity and even some of the clergy to be Church in a new way, and modeling the possibility of that kind of Christian faith and life. However, beginning seriously with the pontificate of John Paul II, the hierarchical Church began a retrenchment from Vatican II which has become increasingly a tridentine restorationism under the current Pope. These two visions of Church are running, one forward and one backward, on parallel ecclesiological tracks.

*Friday: Conclusion of "Religious Life as Prophetic Life Form"*

**The essay in five parts:**

Part One: Religious Life as Prophetic Life Form, Jan. 4

Part Two: Call, Response and Task of Prophetic Action, Jan. 5

Part Three: What Jesus taught us about his prophetic ministry, Jan. 6

Part Four: Tasks of those who choose the prophetic life style, Jan. 7

Part Five: Religious life: sharing Jesus' passion, resurrection, Jan. 8

Read NCR's coverage of the apostolic visitation of U.S. women religious here: [Index of stories](#)

Read an interview with Sr. Schneiders. She explains why she wrote this essay: [Schneiders to explore meaning of religious life today](#)

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