

## Religious life: sharing Jesus' passion, resurrection

Sandra Schneiders | Jan. 8, 2010



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*This is the fifth and final 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, offers her conclusions in her essay entitled "Religious Life as Prophetic Life Form." These essays run from Jan. 4 through Jan. 8.*

### Conclusion

We can now see the parallel between the two-level analysis of the execution of Jesus and the two levels of the struggle between U.S. women Religious and the Vatican. At the surface level Jesus was executed to put a stop to his "stirring up the people" which threatened the status quo of the Empire and the Temple. But at the deepest level, although "they knew not what they were doing," the officials were trying to neutralize the radical revolution Jesus was introducing into their "world." Jesus was initiating, by his prophetic words and works, a "new creation," totally at odds with the satanic domination systems in power not only in political and religious institutions but in the human race as a whole. He was inaugurating and inviting people into the Reign of God, into a regime of endless and unconditioned compassion that would overflow into and empower a new form of justice based not on retribution and coercive power but on forgiveness of sins and inclusion in the all-embracing love of God. The Resurrection was God's "yes" to Jesus' work and "no" to the murder that tried to stop it.

Since Jesus, the Reign of God is "loose" in this world, working its painful way through the witness of saints and martyrs toward its full eschatological realization. The "powers" of this world are still at work to prevent this realization but, as Jesus said to his disciples on the eve of his death, "Have confidence; I have overcome the world."

When we get down to the deeper levels of the question with which this essay began, "Why are Religious, of all people, being investigated by the Vatican?" we can discern the same two levels. At the surface level Religious are being threatened because they have been "upsetting the (patriarchal) order" of the Church as institution in which the hierarchy has its position of power. But they are calling into question not only absolute male power over women (which was not invented by and is not restricted to the Church) but also the necessity of understanding the Church itself as essentially an institution based on sacralized power. Religious, by their community life, are aligning themselves with the ecclesiology of the Church as People of God expressed in *Lumen Gentium*, a discipleship of equals, within which they are both exemplars and facilitators but also in solidarity with those to whom they no longer wish to be "superior" or "elite." They are gratefully living among their lay sisters and brothers the oneness of the Body of Christ. This ecclesiology is no threat to the community

Jesus gathered around him but it is a threat to an understanding of Church as a sacralized empire. It goes back to Jesus, not to Constantine.

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But this Body of Christ, which we are, exists not just for the Church itself but for the world which God so loved. It is not a place of privilege or power, a sanctuary of the perfect, but the effective presence of Christ in the world in service of all those for whom Jesus died and rose. This is the vision of the Church in the world that came to marvelous expression in *Gaudium et Spes*.

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The struggle between Religious and the hierarchy is really, at its core, a struggle over the nature of Religious Life itself which is necessarily determined by how one understands the Church in its relation to the world. Is this life a job corps of submissive workers carrying out hierarchically assigned and supervised institutional Church tasks designed to bring all people into the Roman Catholic Church and into subjection to its leadership? Or is Religious Life a charismatically grounded, prophetic life form in the Church called by God to the ever ambiguous task of discerning how the Gospel, the good news of the Reign of God, can be made salvifically operative in the concrete and confusing situations in which believers must live their Christ-life today in witness to all peoples of the infinite loving-kindness of our God?

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If, as I believe, it is the latter then the primary ?offense? of ministerial Religious is that they are reading the ?signs of the times? as a call to sustain and promote the renewal inaugurated by Vatican II while some officials of the institution itself are trying to restore the tridentine vision of the Church as a power structure defending itself against a threatening world that is promoting a culture of death. Like the disciples preaching Jesus as the crucified messiah when they had been told by the authorities that that interpretation of the paschal events was false, threatening to the authorities, and not to be proclaimed, Religious are embodying in their lives and proclaiming to others an interpretation of the Council that is not approved by many in the hierarchy. Rather than ?obediently? supporting the restoration, they are promoting the ongoing conciliar renewal in their own lives and among the laity.

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The re-centralization of power in the Vatican, the re-clericalization of ministry, the restoration of liturgy as a mysterious and private clerical performance to which the baptized are an appreciative but passive audience, and the reduction of spirituality to private devotionism which are central to the restorationist agenda, are endangered by the theology of Vatican II which Religious are living and promoting. Gamaliel?s test is the only one which will eventually adjudicate this difference of interpretation. Was the Council a definitive and irreversible Pentecostal renewal of the Church which, no matter how difficult it will be to do so, must be lived into the future, and, in any case, cannot be suppressed any more than the apostolic preaching could be? Or was it the mistake of false ?enthusiasts? that needs to be corrected by a ?reform of the reform?? That adjudication is going to take considerable time.

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It is difficult to see how the ongoing tension between official authority and Religious Life that is part of this Church-wide struggle can be resolved. But a first step toward non-violence and mutuality, even in difference, is to recognize the problem. Religious, it seems to me, need to claim and define their own life as they have come to understand it and live it with courage and integrity but without arrogance or unnecessary provocation. Religious Life is not a grade on the hierarchical ladder; it does not belong to the hierarchical organization of the Church at all. It is a charismatically grounded close following and imitation of Jesus and his itinerant band of disciples. The vocation to prophetic ministry is intrinsic to this life form. This is true of the life form itself and therefore of Congregations and individual members.

tMost Religious I know deeply desire open communication, understanding, mutual respect, and cooperation in ministry within the institutional Church. They have consistently shown themselves willing to go much more than the ?extra mile? to achieve this goal. But they are not willing to de-nature their life or ministry any more

than the first disciples were willing to ?not preach in that name any more ?

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A second step, at least so it seems to me, is for Religious to pray their way, personally and corporately, into a peaceful and courageous acceptance that the tension between institutional authority and prophetic ministry is and will always be part of the life of the Body of Christ, the journey of the People of God through history, because it was structurally intrinsic to Jesus' own prophetic life and ministry. Part of understanding Religious Life today, for Religious themselves and for others, is a double realization. First, prophetic ministry is absolutely necessary for the Church in every age even though it will never be welcomed by institutional authority. Second, the exercise of that ministry, which is intrinsic to Religious Life, will always involve misunderstanding of one's best intentions, persecution and suffering, and sometimes even crucifixion, which Jesus told his disciples at the last supper, often may be at the hands of the religious authorities who think that thereby ?they are giving glory to God? (Jn. 16:2).

tReligious cannot expect to experience Jesus' Resurrection if we are unwilling to share his passion. And we do not always have the luxury of choosing whether we will suffer at the hands of secular powers or of the Church's power structure. But Jesus says to us as he did to Paul in the midst of his ministerial struggles, which came most often from the religious rather than the secular authorities, ?My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor. 12:9).

### **The essay in five parts:**

[Part One: Religious Life as Prophetic Life Form](#) [1], Jan. 4

[Part Two: Call, Response and Task of Prophetic Action](#) [2], Jan. 5

[Part Three: What Jesus taught us about his prophetic ministry](#) [3], Jan. 6

[Part Four: Tasks of those who choose the prophetic life style](#) [4], Jan. 7

[Part Five: Religious life: sharing Jesus' passion, resurrection](#) [5], Jan. 8

Read NCR's coverage of the apostolic visitation of U.S. women religious here: [Index of stories](#) [6]

Read an interview with Sr. Schneiders. She explains why she wrote this essay: [Schneiders to explore meaning of religious life today](#) [7]

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