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Schneiders: Prophetic future ahead for women religious

by Heidi Schlumpf

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Sr. Sandra Schneiders speaks at St. Mary's College in Indiana Sept. 24. (Photos courtesy of the Center for Spirituality at Saint Mary's College)

NOTRE DAME, Ind. -- Reports of the demise of religious life, to paraphrase Mark Twain, are greatly exaggerated, theologian Sr. Sandra M. Schneiders said in a Sept. 24 speech, drawing applause from the audience at St. Mary's College here for the line, "I come to praise this life, not bury it."

"Women's ministerial religious life has a future in this time and beyond," said Schneiders, professor emerita at the Jesuit School of Theology in Berkeley, Calif. "We will not look today or in the future as we looked in the past -- either in outer appearance, or in age, or in numbers, or in lifestyle, or in ministry. But we will be what we have been since the first century, disciples personally called by Christ to commit ourselves totally to him."

Religious life will continue, Schneiders asserted, but communities of religious women will be smaller in number, renewed through reconfiguration and less institutional in their ministry. And, like the rest of the U.S. population, women religious will be older, but still active in their advanced years.

Schneiders is a member of Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary of Monroe, Mich. Her talk, "The Future of Religious Life," was hosted by the college's Center for Spirituality and was held in conjunction with the "Women & Spirit: Catholic Sisters in America" traveling exhibit, which will be at the Center for History in South Bend until Dec. 31, before moving to the California Museum of History, Women and the Arts in Sacramento.

The exhibit, sponsored by the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, tells the story of the nearly a quarter of a million Catholic women who have helped shape the social and cultural landscape of America since the arrival of the first Ursuline Sisters in New Orleans nearly three centuries ago.

The majority of the exhibit focuses on what Schneiders calls the "institutional boom period" of the mid-19th to mid-20th century, when thousands of women religious, many of them foreign missionaries, provided education, medical care and social services for the great waves of immigrants who came to the U.S. from Europe.

"That period gave us a glorious, inspiring and astoundingly productive model of large contingents of sisters engaged in hierarchically governed ecclesiastical apostolates in Catholic institutions such as schools, hospitals and social service agencies," Schneiders said. "But this model fit its time, not ours. That was then, but this is now."

At the height of the surge of women entering the convent after World War II, there were more than 180,000 women religious in the U.S., compared to just under 60,000 today.

"A cohort of 59,000 to 60,000 people totally committed to the quest for God and the promotion of Jesus' reign in this world is not, on the face of it, an ecclesial disaster, much less a scandal," Schneiders said. "There are plenty of things to weep over in our church these days, but women's religious life, I would submit, is not one of them."

In fact, there are about 10,000 more religious women in the U.S. today than there were at any point between 1720 and 1900, a time more comparable to our own, when fewer religious women "in small, widely dispersed groups were doing whatever needed doing for whomever needed it and with whoever wanted to help them," she said.

The unusually high numbers between 1900-1960 meant that the decline after 1970 -- caused more by historical and societal factors like smaller Catholic families and expanded opportunities for women -- seemed especially precipitous, leading some to attribute it to infidelity, which Schneiders called "pseudo-theological nonsense."

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"The same logic that concludes that the AIDS epidemic is God's way of wiping out homosexuality apparently suggests to these people that God is also purging the church of evil Vatican II nuns," she said, adding that the opposite belief -- that God rewards fidelity with worldly success -- is also flawed theological reasoning.

"Religious life is not a for-profit venture whose product needs repackaging or a new advertising campaign because the bottom line is not showing a profit," Schneiders said. "The real question is, are the people in religious life today truly called to that life? Are they living it with integrity and passion? And are they offering it clearly and compellingly to people who are genuinely called to it today, even though, for many reasons, these will probably be fewer than in times past?"

Her answer was a resounding yes.

"Religious life is the oldest vocation lifeform in the church, preceding both matrimony and ordained ministry as public vocations in the church," she said. "And even in its worst times of internal corruption

and external persecution, the church has never been totally devoid of this lifeform. Indeed, it has at times been the best hope of the church in crisis. Romantic rhetoric to the contrary notwithstanding, religious life is more like a sturdy dandelion than a delicate rosebush in the frequently unkempt garden of the church.?

What will be different in the future, however, is the age of most religious women and, more importantly, their ministry, Schneiders said.

Women religious will continue to be older than in generations past as many of them reach higher life expectancy levels in good health and smaller numbers of younger people enter. But this mirrors the larger American culture, where the most productive years of adulthood are now 50 to 75, rather than 35-45, Schneiders said.

Increased life expectancies and better health in later years has prompted a revision of the typical lifecycle pattern, even in our ?youth-fixated, age-denying culture,? she said. It?s not unheard of to see parents of toddlers in their 50s, marathon runners in their 60s, candidates for political office in their 70s, Supreme Court justices in their 80s -- and religious women active in ministry even into their 90s.

?Whatever was the case in 1950, today religious life is not for kids,? Schneiders said, describing the implication of these lifespan changes on religious life. ?I suspect the lifeform will remain, from now on, an adult vocation?It is probably really not desirable that people enter religious life before their late 20s or early 30s because they are culturally and psychologically unlikely to be ready for a permanent life commitment.?

Admittedly, fewer will be entering religious life, but again Schneiders noted that the vitality of religious life is not a function of numbers.

?I doubt we will ever again see a surge like that of the post-World War II influx. But, as the first hundred years of religious life in this country attests, we do not need hordes of novices to scrub miles of gleaming corridors in giant motherhouses or armies of young nuns to staff the institutions of a ghetto church defending itself against the world. And it is certainly not our vocation to supply a huge corps of docile, unpaid workers for the hierarchy?s projects,? she said.

This shift from institutionalized ministries that most Catholics today associate with religious women to new models of ministry may be the most dramatic change -- and the one most difficult for some in the church to accept, given the propensity to see the model in which Sisters staffed schools and hospitals as the only one possible.

?Even if the necessary resources were available to revive the institutional apostolates of the pre-conciliar century, especially those directed primarily to the needs of people at the two ends of the life-cycle, children and the sick and dying, these ministries may not be where religious are most needed today,? she said.

The disappearance of many of these institutions, such as Catholic schools, left religious women ?not just economically jobless but ministerially ?homeless,?? Schneiders said. This led many of them to relocate into parish and diocesan ministries, where they were often abused by the clerical power structure. Quipped Schneiders: ?Women religious probably hold some kind of record for most people who have been fired because they are competent!?

Increasingly, religious women have taken their expertise into ministries that, while still in continuity with those of the past and arising directly out of their communities? charisms, are not ones most Catholics tend to associate with ?the Sisters.?

Schneiders grouped them into four 'clusters':

- Social justice ministers focused on systemic or structural change, whose 'theological glue' tends to be Catholic social teaching. These include social scientists, activists, lawyers, political and community organizers, economists and sociologists, urban farmers and legislators.
- Ministers who work directly with the victims of social injustice or natural disasters, whose theological glue is deep compassion for the suffering Body of Christ. These include chaplains, social workers, counselors, literacy tutors, providers of child care or elder care, managers of low-income housing, those who work in homeless shelters or with victims of torture or sex trafficking.
- Intellectuals, scholars and artists, whose theological glue is faith seeking understanding in our time. These include composers, performers, journalists, writers, teachers and researchers in theology, philosophy and the sciences.
- Ministers who address the thirst for meaning and transcendence, with the theological glue of spiritual nourishment and growth. They work in spirituality centers, campus ministry, spiritual direction, retreats, holistic healing, or as popular writers or speakers on the lecture and workshop circuit.

These charismatic and prophetic ministries differ from previous ones not in their service or witness, but primarily in their individualization, which some initially saw as a 'loss of corporate identity because Sisters were not all doing the same thing,' Schneiders said.

But such individualization -- partly a function of professional specialization by religious women -- need not lead to individualism, Schneiders said. 'Uniformity is not the only, or even the best, kind of social glue, nor large, homogeneous groups the only meaning of community,' she said. 'Diversity can generate another, more organic, but more challenging kind of unity.'

Just as the first religious women to come to America traded large European monasteries for log cabins in the wilderness, so are today's Sisters flexible about their living arrangements. 'Responding to the needs of the People of God determines where and how we live,' she said. 'First, the preaching of the Gospel where it is most needed. Then, everything else.'

These new ministries are more likely to involve collaboration with laity, including as associate members, and they often espouse an egalitarian and collegial approach that stems from the feminist consciousness of many women religious, which can lead to conflict with the 'patriarchal sensibility of the institutional church,' Schneiders said.

'This does not necessarily mean that irresolvable or incessant conflict is inevitable or that strenuous efforts to work together effectively should be abandoned,' she said. 'But it does mean that, as in the time of the prophets in ancient Israel and the prophet Jesus in relation to the institutional Judaism of his time, so today religious can expect ongoing tension with the hierarchy. Accepting this always painful dissonance, rather than denying it, feeling guilty about it or trying to placate those who reject feminism in theory and practice, is part of the new ministerial model that is emerging in religious life.'

Promoting the visibility of religious women, however, is one of the challenges of this new ministerial model. 'How to be corporately and personally visible in a variety of non-ostentatious ways rather than through identical or even bizarre clothing or common dwelling or uniform work is a challenge we are still trying to meet,' Schneiders said.

'If we can reclaim and re-articulate our ministerial identity in contemporary terms, which I believe we are

in the process of doing, we will become newly visible in the church," she said. "As the ministerial dimension of the life becomes more coherent it will attract some serious, spiritually sensitive younger adults who will choose this life, not as a solution to their late adolescent identity anxiety, nor as a ticket to elite status and privilege in the church or assured peer group solidarity, nor as a haven of absolutism to protect them from the ambiguities of adult responsibility in a frighteningly complex culture.

"Rather," she said, "they will choose it in response to a genuine vocation to seek God to the exclusion of any other primary life commitment and to promote the Reign of God in this world with all the energy of their lives."

Schneiders received a standing ovation from the hundreds gathered for the talk, including habited women religious, a good number with grey hair and walkers, but also some young faces and ones that were not white.

After the talk, during Schneiders' appearance at the "Women & Spirit" exhibit, an international group of



for the Sisters of the Holy Cross gathered around

Schneiders as if she were a rock star, peppering her with questions and hanging on her stories about life when she was their age.

"It's like seeing her books come alive," said Thais Bitencourt of Brazil, who said the novices are reading Schneiders' *Selling All: Commitment, Consecrated Celibacy, and Community in Catholic Religious Life* and *New Wineskins: Re-Imagining Religious Life Today*.

"Even though we are from other parts of the world, we can identify some of ourselves in what she said," said Comfort Arthur, a novice from Ghana. "I like that she came to praise religious life, not to bury it. The future of religious life is still there. We are here to help people out, especially the marginalized."

While the novices giggled at an old-fashioned Holy Cross habit, others who had heard the talk reflected on Schneiders' analysis of religious life today and in the future.

"I most appreciated the sense of putting today's religious women with the early religious who were called to meet the needs of people at that time," said Sr. Therese Ann Quigney, a School Sister of St. Francis of Christ the King from Lemont, Ill.

Schneiders' message, said at least one religious brother, wasn't just for women. "She gives great hope and encouragement to any religious in the United States," said Holy Cross Br. Joe McTaggart, who works in ministry with elderly religious and laity in South Bend, Ind.

Not all in the audience were religious. A group of rectors from the University of Notre Dame who work with religious women agreed with Schneiders' analysis of the need for laity and religious women to collaborate.

'For me, being a lay minister, I'm conscious of not wanting to be a replacement for religious life,' said Annie Selak, 28.

More than a few remembered the past described by Schneiders. Jude Wholey of Boston was one of 68 to join the Holy Cross convent in 1959, although she left religious life in 1970.

'There's great hope in what [Schneiders] said,' said Wholey. 'I'm thinking about re-upping!'

[Heidi Schlumpf is an *NCR* columnist and contributor.]

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