

- 1 The decline of religious life.¹
 - 1.1 The problem here is not simply that of a decline in numbers. That is, at most, a symptom of another and more serious problem. What is under discussion here is the rather widespread uncertainty about whether religious life makes sense, about whether it is humanly fulfilling. Doubts in this area are common, as is the uneasy feeling that religious life really belongs to another era and is destined to die out, at least in the western world.²
- 2 There is a good explanation for some of the doubt and uncertainty. Religious life has always been plagued by misunderstanding.
 - 2.1 From the period shortly after the Council of Trent (1545 - 1563) and up to the time of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) there was a great deal of superficiality in religious life.³ Respect for silly customs and meaningless ritual often took the place of genuine religious commitment. Religious orders were inordinately proud of little details that separated them from others. The founder or foundress was idealized and made into a kind of supra-historical icon.
 - 2.2 Often enough, the purpose of religious life seemed to be to keep members of the order in a state of childish immaturity. Superiors, no matter how stupid, were always assumed to know best, and it was quite common, to label the nonsense these people perpetrated as the will of God – certainly a blasphemy, though usually unconscious.
 - 2.3 Legalism was rife, as was a kind of dedication to the «holy rule,» and all of its manifold interpretations, which would have made a Pharisee blush. Armed with the holy rule, the religious was often counseled to

¹The term «religious life» is used in a technical sense here. It does not refer to those who are drawn to reflection on or the practice of religion, but rather to those, mainly in the Catholic and Orthodox churches, who live lives characterized by the three vows of, or commitments to, poverty, chastity, and obedience.

²The numbers of men and women entering religious life in the churches of Asia and Africa show little signs of decline; the contrary seems to be the case, but this phenomenon raises the question of whether, as western prosperity and value-systems reach these lands, the same symptoms of decline will appear.

³This was not something new; the need for frequent reform movements in earlier centuries shows that many entered religious life to secure a respite from the stresses and strains of life in the world, and that obligations imposed by the vows were often treated lightly.

- seek perfection in ways that had more to do with Pelagius⁴ than with Paul.
- 2.4 Finally, the motivation for religious life was often problematic: for many it had become a flight from the evil world and its temptations into a kind of sacred nature preserve, where they could work out their salvation in peace and security.
 - 3 Today there are more serious reasons for doubt and uncertainty about religious life, because of developments in moral theology and psychology, which have raised the question of the degree of fulfillment possible in religious life.
 - 3.1 In the period after the Second World War, two Jesuit theologians – Karl Rahner and John Courtney Murray – raised some questions about the vows. Both pointed out that, although good in themselves, they posed certain dangers that should be taken seriously: each of the vows could be seen as exempting a man or woman from a challenge, a creative task, which has much to do with becoming a complete human person. First, the task of using and enjoying material things without being dominated by them (poverty). Second, the creative and maturing encounter with the opposite sex (chastity.) And third, the struggle to attain true autonomy and freedom (obedience).
 - 3.2 In recent years the discussion has centered more and more on the problem of celibacy and chastity, and this is probably a good thing. We are sexual beings; we exist as men or women in all dimensions of our lives. We are either manly or womanly persons, and the achievement of personality has much to do with a creative polar relationship with the opposite sex.
 - 3.2.1 An older moral theology had been able to justify sexual activity only for procreation, and it had placed all other facets of human sexuality under the shadow of sin. In such a view, avoidance of sexual activity was a positive good.
 - 3.2.2 But recent trends in moral theology see conjugal love as a great good, and see sexual activity as that which is called to express, foster, and promote it.
 - 3.2.3 Inevitably, this new emphasis on marriage as a human good for husband and wife prompted the question of whether those who renounce conjugal love, can be fully human, can be real men and women.
 - 3.2.4 These questions have, in turn, prompted a certain amount of

⁴Pelagius was a fourth century Celtic monk, who saw salvation, not as a gift of God, but as the result of spiritual exertion and strength of will on the part of the individual.

nervous speculation about just how sexual a celibate should really be. Inevitably this speculation has given us some silly and harmful answers.

- 3.3 In addition to these good and serious questions about religious life – questions which, if answered honestly, can lead to a new esteem of religious life, there are other objections to religious life which simply reflect the values (or lack thereof) of the world we live in. Religious life seems incomprehensible, and even weird, to those who identify human fulfillment with instant gratification, and who see sex as a spectator sport, or as an activity for gourmets or erotic engineers.
- 4 In the face of doubt and uncertainty about the meaningfulness of religious life in itself, and about its power to integrate the human personality, there has been a tendency in recent years to explain and justify religious life on the basis of the activity to which the members of the religious order are dedicated – teaching, preaching, nursing, missionary work, and other apostolates.
 - 4.1 Some points have to be made here. The tasks mentioned are important, even essential for the life of the church; but we have to ask if they are really different if done by laypeople rather than by religious. The honest answer is that the individual lay/wo/man can be just as effective as the individual religious. However, it is often true that a religious order brings a corporate, institutional commitment, and a continuity in discharging these tasks, without which they would be performed in a haphazard way, if at all. This is perhaps particularly true of teaching.
 - 4.2 But note that this merely sidesteps the question of the human fulfillment of the religious. Can there be any form of activity or service that could justify depriving people of the opportunity for human fulfillment, *if this really were the fate of members of religious orders?* If religious life is not meaningful in itself, and in terms of the genuine human fulfillment which it can bring, then nothing can justify it.
- 5 This implies that the real meaning of religious (even deeper than the vows, because it precedes and underlies them, and can exist without them) lies in the special kind of relationship with God that religious life offers, and to which it calls. Many different activities and forms of service can flow from this call and this relationship.
 - 5.1 This special relationship with God has much to do with the second vow – or more accurately, the decision to remain unmarried for the sake of the kingdom.
 - 5.2 This is not to say that *not* marrying, or *not* engaging in a sexual relationship is the center of religious life; that would miss the point entirely. It would be better to avoid terms like celibacy and chastity, because of their negative connotations.

- 5.3 Paradoxically, we can come to understand the role of remaining unmarried for the sake of the kingdom by turning to that very development which today seems to threaten the validity of religious life – that is, to the high value placed on conjugal love in modern Christian thought, and to the increasingly positive valuation of sex as a way of fostering and expressing love, and therefore as a way of perfecting husband and wife.
- 5.4 The question then is this: how is it possible to reconcile the high value of conjugal love and its great importance for personal fulfillment with the choice which the Christian message has inspired some men and women to make from the very earliest times: the choice to remain unmarried for the sake of the kingdom. Jesus was not married,⁵ and neither was Paul.
- 5.5 More specifically, the question is this: since we become persons as men or women, and since conjugal love plays an essential role in this process, what happens to those who deliberately choose not to have conjugal love play a role in their lives? Is there any substitute for conjugal love, anything that can replace it?
- 5.6 What is in question here is not the celibacy of the priesthood in the Latin rite of the Catholic church. The latter is simply a law of the Latin rite, and its scriptural pedigree is very weak. It has much more to do with the vestal principle (tabuistic thinking about the «purity» required of one who serves at the altar), and with the monasticizing of the priesthood at the time of the Gregorian reform (in the years after 1073). The free choice not to marry for the sake of the kingdom should never be confused with a law which forces those who want to serve the people of God as priests not to marry. (I think that it is probable that the essential nature of the religious vocation will be more in evidence when the law of celibacy is abrogated.) None of this, of course, calls into question the possibility of joining two different vocations: the call to religious life and the call to the priesthood.
- 5.7 The question of §5.4 is particularly important today because of the pop-psychology directed at religious in books, articles, workshops, etc. Much of this is left over from the fads of forty years ago, and it is still possible to hear the psycho-babble which articulated these fads. «Let it all hang out,» «Don't be ashamed of your body,» «Reach out and touch the other,» etc., etc. The abhorrence of privacy that comes to the surface in all of this nonsense is not a sign of healthy attitudes toward the

⁵ Not that it would be the end of christology if he had been (as has been suggested by the far-left fringe of American exegetes). But, in fact, the overwhelming evidence is that he was not.

- body, toward one's own sexuality and that of others. More often than not it is a sign of the absence of psycho-sexual maturity.
- 6 The answer to the question posed in §5.4 should proceed in these steps.
- 6.1 Conjugal love is a very high value, but it is not *absolute*. It is one of the two basic forms or ways of living in which God is present to human beings, and in which he challenges us to attain the fullness of human personhood. For the man or woman called to conjugal love (and at this moment in history that seems to be the overwhelming majority), the word which God addresses to them could be put this way: «I give you this woman (man) to love with your whole being, body and spirit. Love her (him) for herself (himself) in peace and in joy, because in so loving each other, you find and love me.» Conjugal love in this sense is certainly an experience of God as the source and ground of all that is, and specifically of this other *person*.
- 7 However, this is not the only possibility. God can be present in my life, not only as the source and ground of this other whom I meet in the mystery of conjugal love, but in another way. God can be, for a man or a woman, that one «other,» that all-fulfilling person, who fulfills this man or woman *precisely in his or her manly or womanly existence*. God is not only the source and ground of human personhood; he is also personal – one who knows and is known, loves and is loved, who speaks a word to another and who listens for the word of reply. Such a God is not only Father, he (she) is father, mother, sister, brother, friend.⁶
- 7.1 Such a God, the real God, is the ground and source of all that is real in our human personhood, in both its manly and womanly forms. God is the living source of all that is distinctive, creative, and unique, in woman as well as in man. God is the eternal ground of all that is deep and true, creative and liberating, in woman as well as in man.
- 7.2 This transcendent one can lay claim to a woman or a man with a totality of which conjugal love is the created reflection. If God approaches me this way, then I am involved with one «who will not pass away, even if heaven and earth pass away.» I am involved with one who shakes the foundations of the created world and relativizes all of its norms and structures. This special kind of relationship can happen. It has happened thousands of times in the past, and it will happen again in the future. It is a special charism and calling, and it is a sign that the church is in good health and is true to itself (although, again, quantitative crite-

⁶ This implies that the biblical naming of God as Father, if taken in an exclusive sense, is a consequence of patriarchal modes of thought, and is therefore historically and socially conditioned.

- ria should not be applied).
- 7.3 This kind of relationship is, ideally, all-absorbing and all-fulfilling. A man or woman is claimed in the fullness of his/her being, by one who is the ground and source of all that is, and whose love brings fulfillment to all that is true and deep in manly and womanly being.⁷
- 7.4 The man or woman who is claimed by God in this way turns to God with a totality which is found, in inner-worldly terms, only in conjugal love. If God turns to me in this way, then I feel the need and the desire to make sacrifices for him. This is what Ignatius spoke of in the *Spiritual Exercises*, especially in the meditation on the Two Standards: God's needs, desires, and cares become our own needs, desires, and cares. This absolute priority of God does not set the religious against the world. It is simply that, from now on, the whole world is God's world, populated by his needy and suffering people.
- 7.5 The man or woman who is loved in this way is challenged and claimed as *man or woman*, even though the specific psychological and erotic aspects of sexuality are absent. They are absent, not because their values are negated, but because in such cases a man or woman is claimed by a love which transcends all creation, and which by that very fact contains within itself the fullness of all created love in its manly and womanly forms.⁸

⁷ Friedrich Wulf, writing in *Mysterium Salutis*, vol. 4.2, p 481, (*Theologische Phänomenologie des Ordenslebens*) makes these comments: «Religious life is first and foremost a declaration of loyalty to God, to the one and only God who is 'all in all' (1Cor 15:28) and who is 'the one thing necessary' (Luke 10:42). God alone, as the ultimate and absolute one, who cannot be compared with anything, the one who is the beginning and the end, the promise and the fulfillment, who lays claim to us in all dimensions of our humanity, is the only justification for religious life. The religious orders today are called to be present to the world, and to see their vocations as lives of service, which should liberate them for their fellow human beings and their needs. But despite this, the ultimate source of religious life is indicated by the words 'God alone,' in such phrases as 'serving God alone,' and 'being there for God alone.' This has been a constant element of the religious tradition from the very beginning.»

⁸ It is the perception of this which accounts for the amazingly frank sexual imagery with which Israel spoke of God. The mystery of human sexuality is rooted in God, and the man or woman for whom God is the all-absorbing «other» can live in faith a mystery of which the elements of eros and libido in human

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- 7.6 This accounts for the authentic manliness or womanliness that religious men and women achieved even at a time when custom allowed only the rarest of contacts with the opposite sex, or even prohibited them entirely.⁹ A little reflection on this can bring much peace to a man or woman in religious life. Admittedly, some of the older attitudes were repressive and even sick, but some of the newer attitudes are silly and harmful. When the religious responds to the all-claiming love of God with the return of the same kind of love, one of the more attractive by-products is a genuine freedom with the opposite sex which is neither coy nor macho nor sexless, and which is relaxed and loving without being precious or «cute.» Human sexual love is a thing of great power and beauty, but to trivialize it or to play with it is one of the most destructive things we can do. To carry on such a dangerous game in the name of «openness» or «freedom» is simply pretentious nonsense.
- 7.7 The all-fulfilling love of God to which the religious is called has no other support. On the purely created level, there is no substitute or compensation for the absence of conjugal love, and the «hundredfold» is cruelly misunderstood if it is forced to play this role. God's all-claiming love is always experienced in faith, and there will always be a certain darkness in which trust in the loved one stands in for the felt experience of the integrating and healing power of that love. It is this element of faith and hope which gives to religious life its contemplative dimension.¹⁰
- 7.8 The love of the religious for the God who claims him or her totally is one which, like every real love, manifests itself in many other loves: love of the church (that is, of the whole people of God), love of the other members of the religious community, and, quite simply, love of the neighbor. The vitality of many forms of religious love has come from a special awareness of the needs of people: their needs for hospitals, schools, missions, for better preaching, the need for dignified liturgy which raises the spirit to God. One who loves God as the all-claiming «other» takes

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sexuality are a reflection.

⁹ That religious have often failed in this respect and become «bachelors» or «old maids» simply underlines the fact that the failure-rate in any worthwhile activity is high – cf. marriage.

¹⁰ But note that this contemplative element is often present in an «ordinary,» matter-of-fact way – a peaceful awareness of the one for whom this life is being lived, in the midst of a good deal of noise, activity, and confusion.

- God's work as his or her own in a great variety of ways. Religious life in this sense often looks like a pragmatic way of getting a necessary job done. But, on a deeper level, it transcends pragmatism. No one is more concerned about practical service of the «other» than the man or woman in love.
- 8 Religious life, the state of being claimed totally and immediately by God is not a higher or better way of living out the faith. It is not more pleasing to God than is the married state, nor are those who choose it holier. It is an alternate form of Christian existence which God offers to some, and it is essential to the church that some accept this offer and live their response to the fullest.
 - 9 Some final observations will touch on the relationship of religious life to scripture.
 - 9.1 It would be good to reflect on the text of Genesis 1:27 about how God created human beings in his image and likeness, «man and woman he created them.» Who must such a God be? What must he be like?
He?!?
 - 9.2 Read all seven of Paul's letters¹¹ just to get a sense of what it was like for this man to be totally claimed by God. Then read through the Synoptic and Johannine material, and try to get a feel for the all-embracing character of Jesus' relationship with the Father. Notice how free it made him, how understanding, how totally human.
 - 9.3 Viewed in this somewhat indirect way, the NT has a great deal to say about the kind of commitment that is expressed in religious life – much more than it does in dealing overtly with issues such as the three vows, or with the concrete forms taken by religious life through the centuries.
 - 9.4 In general, biblical attitudes toward sexuality should be reflected on. The Bible neither demonizes nor divinizes sex; it sees it simply as a great gift of God. When we read it carefully and critically, the NT suggests a way of life in which God himself comes in place of the gift.
 - 9.5 It is vital that all of us (married, religious, and the unmarried, or not yet married who are not in religious life) create a climate in which such a gift is esteemed and can be accepted in joy by those to whom it has been given.

¹¹ That is, the ones he actually wrote: 1Thessalonians, Galatians, 1Corinthians, 2Corinthians, Philipians., Philemon, Romans.