

RELIGIOUS LIFE
FOR OUR WORLD

Creating Communities of Hope

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INTRODUCTION

In This Time of Grace

Thank you for opening this book and beginning a conversation on religious life and consecrated life.

This is an amazing time in religious life and in the world. Our context is that of massive shifting, including dying and rising to new life. It is a markedly paschal time. This is the case not only for religious life, since education, politics, economics, the environment, technology, social media, civil discourse, and a myriad of other areas are also navigating an era of massive uncertainty and transition.

In 2015, Pope Francis opened a Year of Consecrated Life, calling us to “Wake Up the World!” He announced this year on November 29, 2014, at a meeting with the Union of Superiors General.¹ He called us to “be witnesses of a different way of doing things, of acting, of living! It is possible to live differently in this world. We are speaking of an eschatological outlook, of the values of the Kingdom incarnated here, on this earth.” In order to wake up the world, however, we in consecrated life must also wake up. Pope Francis gives us some direction for this, calling us again and again to live in a prophetic way that comes from a deep encounter and relationship with God. The pope at the same time entrusts us to look at our contexts to see what is being called for at this time.

In speaking of formation and how we are to respond to young people, Pope Francis acknowledges that we are in a new time, even saying that “we are living through an epochal change.”² He spoke of many areas in consecrated life, from formation to leadership to relationships with bishops and more, where change and even transformation are needed. In this is an invitation to new life, though not without cost. Birthing new life is a painful, messy, and joyful transformation process.

¹ Union of Superiors General (USG) is a forum for male leaders of religious orders to reflect on issues facing religious life today. The cited document is found at <https://w2.vatican.va>.

² Antonio Spadaro, SJ, “‘Wake Up the World!’ Conversation with Pope Francis about the Religious Life,” *La Civiltà Cattolica* (2014) I, 3–17, trans. Donald Maldari, SJ (revised, January 6, 2015), <https://onlineministries.creighton.edu>. The meeting with the members of Union of Superiors General (USG) occurred on November 29, 2013.

This is good news, for while there is massive shifting, there is much that is budding as well. Something is emerging that we cannot yet see, though more and more I meet people who sense this movement. Some places in the world of religious life are experiencing growth, and there is need for formation resources and other supports for religious. Other places in the world are experiencing a decline in numbers of religious as well as an increase of ministries that have a long history, which are now in the capable hands of partners in mission.

Yet the call to consecrated life is much deeper, inviting a conversion that will help us continue to participate in God's mission. We are asked for openness to personal and communal transformation. The Year of Consecrated Life in 2015 invited religious to look with gratitude upon the past, to live the present with zeal, and to look forward to the future by being joyful and brave men and women of communion.³

Consecrated life is being asked to look at its structures in order to see what is still helpful and what needs to change for the sake of mission. In November 2017, the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life (CICLSAL) issued guidelines titled *New Wine in New Wineskins* to further encourage religious to the conversion, transformation, and revitalization needed for our time and our futuring.

The hope and goal of this little book on religious life is to provide a framework for analysis and reflection toward transformation. Personal conversion is needed in order to respond to the Spirit. Communal transformation is required if congregations are to make the changes needed to respond to the cries of this time through the gift of charism. External revitalization is also needed if we are to respond to the church and world today. We do all of this through spiritual, theological, pastoral, experiential, and practical lenses.

Title and Audiences

I offer a few words about the title, *Religious Life for Our World: Creating Communities of Hope*. Although neither I nor anyone else can speak to religious life in the *entire* twenty-first century, we live this life in and for this time. The context is intentionally present, and not simply for the next few years. The vision of religious life is to be expansive even as the details evolve in living in and responding to the times. Just as religious life has a storied history, this title presumes religious life will be part of this entire century—and beyond.

Though the changes in some places will be significant and costly, there is no indication that God is closing the chapter on religious life. Too much is in motion calling us to renewal and revitalization. There is no guarantee that each congregation will continue beyond this epoch, but it is certain that the Spirit is still calling people to religious life. We cannot know exactly what religious life will look like in

³ Pope Francis, Message for the Opening of the Year of Consecrated Life, November 30, 2014, <https://w2.vatican.va>.

the future. Religious life and consecrated life will continue and evolve, though the details will vary according to present congregations and those yet to come.

I use the term *religious life* in the title because it is a term accessible to many. I am aware, though, that *religious life* is a subheading under *consecrated life*. I speak to religious life and consecrated life similarly, though the terms are distinct. *Consecrated life* “refers to several ways of life in the Church, all of which presume a special dedication to God marked by the attempt to conform oneself to the life of Jesus Christ.”⁴ Within consecrated life, one way of life is religious life. In *religious life*, women and men “express their dedication through the profession of the public vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience within a canonically established religious institute. The charism and spirituality of each institute and the needs of its apostolate determine its particular practices regarding community, prayer, and ministry.”⁵ Many of the topics I discuss in this book have relevance to other areas of consecrated life. Ministry and prayer, while lived differently in different religious orders or movements, are key elements in every order and movement.⁶

Religious life as I discuss it here is *for* the twenty-first century. The call is to contribute to this time in which we live. The term “for” focuses us outward even as the revitalization will be both internal and external.

Creating speaks to engaging the religious imagination in religious life, in the church and in our world today. Creativity is a characteristic of the Spirit.

Creating Communities of Hope

Joan Chittister, OSB, famously said some years ago that this was not the time for prophetic individuals, but for prophetic communities. While the individual prophet must be acknowledged and encouraged, religious life is asking us to create *communities* of hope. The antidote for the challenges of this time must include persons and groups building inclusion rather than exclusion.

Hope is a transcendent virtue, pointing us to God and God’s vision. Hope is also a communal virtue, for we hope together. Communities of hope create conditions for persons and communities to thrive. Hope connects us to the past and present, for we bring with us all those who have lived religious life before us. Hope, far from being a fantasy, is rooted in the real—yet it sees the vision of the Reign of God and works toward it. Communities of hope, in religious life and beyond, serve as a transformative witness of God’s in-breaking in this time.

⁴ This helpful definition is found in Mary Johnson, SNDdeN, Patricia Wittberg, SC, and Mary L. Gautier, eds., *New Generations of Catholic Sisters: The Challenge of Diversity* (Cambridge: Oxford University Press, 2014), 32.

⁵ *Ibid.* In addition, it is to be noted that some congregations have four vows. Two examples are the Ursuline Sisters of Cleveland and the Sisters of Mercy.

⁶ Contemplative orders would say that their prayer for the world is part of their ministry.

For Our World

Creating communities of hope for our world is not only for international congregations. Each of us is called to create communities of hope. We may be monastics living in the same place our entire religious lives, congregations connected to a city or region or country, or congregations with members in many countries. Each person and each community has something significant to contribute. Connecting these people and communities helps us offer what is required and builds a wider communion as witness in our divided, wounded world, hungering for belonging. As we create such communities of hope, we link our efforts together with others to the ends of the earth. We link with one another in religious life, but even more we are called to connect *all* persons and communities. When we are so linked, no one falls in the cracks. Everyone belongs. All is in God. All are in relationship in our common home. Our call to create communities of hope includes all people—not only “the poor,” the marginalized, and the oppressed—because we are part of the whole, and thus we recognize that our individual selves are connected to every other self and to our planet. Even the fact that a book can be written with the title *Religious Life for Our World: Creating Communities of Hope* speaks to the shifting that has already begun in religious life.

I have written this book because I believe that when we engage in conversations of consequence and depth about religious life, the life moves. Intentional, reflective conversations reveal the roots of our call and give us the courage to go deeper in our response to God, to one another, and to all of creation.

This book is written for many readers: anyone interested in the transformation of religious life; women and men religious interested in delving into areas of revitalization in religious life today; persons serving in leadership; persons in various stages of formation and for those walking with them; and persons in partnership with religious, who wish to live out their calls as associates or colleagues/partners in mission.

My personal context is that of a North American woman religious (born in Slovenia) who is Caucasian, lives in an international community, and is part of an international congregation, Religious of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. I am a theologian, and I teach at Catholic Theological Union (CTU), a graduate school of theology and ministry in Chicago with an international student body and faculty. I am the director of CTU’s Center for the Study of Consecrated Life (CSCL), created to engage contemporary issues in consecrated life today. Over the course of more than twenty-five years in religious life I have had the privilege of dialoguing with and learning from women and men religious on six continents. I have offered presentations on four continents, and it was these most recent experiences, together with my years of teaching courses on religious life, that have encouraged me and finally galvanized the writing of this book.

All can be one at the table, with our diverse gifts creating the emerging consecrated life. One of the calls of religious life is to peacebuilding and reconciliation.

We are called to offer space even for those who are missing so that we may build communities of hope on both a global and local scale.

Overview and Structure of the Book

Part One: Contexts, Call, Charism, and Contemplation

Chapter 1 considers some local and global snapshots of religious life today in light of the cries we hear.⁷ These are simply meant to be broad strokes and starter images. Within each continent and country are many details that are not possible to encapsulate in this project. I instead offer some basic statistics from the Vatican's *Annuario*⁸ and some "state of the question" observations. I provide some broad observations about realities and questions concerning sisters, brothers, and religious priests, as well as five points of concern and movement in religious life in broad regional areas.

There are three parts to this chapter. I begin with a look at some of the calls from the world, listening to the cries of the people and the cries of the earth. These are not comprehensive but indicative of realities that God is seeing and that we must see as well, with heart, mind, and will. Second, as religious life is part of the heart of the church, I also look at the calls from the church in our time. Third, I look at the context of consecrated/religious life today. In all three sections, the call for interior conversion, internal transformation, and external revitalization is clear and inviting.

Chapter 2 looks at call and charism. Call begins with God, who longs for us and for relationship with us. This first call at some point brings us to Christian community, rooted in baptism. The call to consecrated life is a call within a call, beckoning us to a particular community whose way of lived discipleship attracts us. Within the larger charism of consecrated life, there is a charismatic attraction that brings us to one congregation rather than another. Living our Christian baptismal call is within the call to consecrated life, connected to both the charism of religious life and to a particular charism within religious life. I will delve into the role of the Spirit and of charism as a gift of the Spirit from which religious life flows. A renewed look at charism helps us see more clearly and deeply our participation in God's mission.

Chapter 3 explores how our religious life vocation can be sustained only through a life of prayer in relationship with God. While we have many names for our way of prayer (meditation, contemplation, faith reflection, and so on), in each of these God draws us to friendship and union. Religious life is, in essence, a call to contemplation. We will see in this call the oneness of the commandments of the

⁷ The format of this book came from a fall 2017 lecture series I was invited to offer at Catholic Theological Union.

⁸ The *Annuario Statisticum Ecclesiae 2017*, published by the Vatican Press on June 3, 2019, <https://press.vatican.va>.

love of God and the love of neighbor. A religious life vocation is thus also a call to relationship.

I will particularly look at contemplation through the lenses of (1) missionary discipleship and Jesus's prayer and ministry, (2) mystical prophetic life, and (3) radical prophetic hope.

Part Two: Mission, Love, and the Vowed Life

Chapter 4 connects God's call to the cries of the world and discusses how the vows are to be lived in light of charisms. The vows are to be Good News for us, for one another, and for all the people of God and all of God's creation. The vows also have particular meanings in particular times, framed and reframed, with the essentials still intact.

In this chapter I briefly: (1) set the evangelical counsels in a historical context, (2) frame the vows as virtues, and (3) set the vows within the context of mission and charism. We will see how each of the vows must be lived out in prayer, community, and ministry. The vows have personal, communal, and congregational dimensions. I conclude with twelve keys to considering the vows.

Chapter 5 begins with a brief historical overview of the terms that often get bounced around with celibacy. I look at how consecrated celibacy is to be Good News for us, for those around us, particularly the most vulnerable, and for all God's creation. We approach consecrated celibacy as an invitation to love God and receive God's love, and through this primary Love to love others and all of God's gifts. Consecrated celibacy cannot be sustained without intimacy, so I look at elements of intimacy to be cultivated in religious life. We will see the gift of friendship as part of God's invitation to experience and grow in love.

The vow of celibacy also helps us go to vulnerable places—our own and that of others. It can be the space of healing. Because we come to vulnerable places we must be attentive to how we live this vow. A healthy human sexuality is crucial.

Chapter 6 focuses on community. There are so many ways in which the deepening of our love for others gets lived out in community (*ad intra* and *ad extra*). Community is a door we have to go through with our own self-knowledge, and a door through which we have to let others in. Community is also a destination because we are called to create and build community, within and outside of our own living situations and even congregations. We do this through our charism and in response to particular needs around us. In this chapter I look at some biblical foundations of community and then move to contemporary calls in building intercultural communities, gender justice, racial justice, and the role of religious brothers. I consider how both conflict and friendship offer opportunities for building community, locally and on a global scale.

Chapter 7 explores poverty as both an invitation and a challenging reality in the world today, asking how our vow of poverty is to be Good News for all the people of God. I begin with some contemporary challenges to living poverty and

then move to a brief look at scripture, history, and virtue regarding how one might consider poverty today. The vow of poverty is to be a witness to the freedom of the people of God, the abundance that is possible. Religious life and the vow of poverty call us to a closeness to those who are poor. I offer some ways in which the vow of poverty lives in our prayer, community life, and ministry. The living of this vow flows, as do all the vows, into prayer, ministry, and community.

Chapter 8 reminds us that obedience is about deep listening that then moves one to action. I briefly look at the evolution of this vow and some of its challenges over the years, and I consider what the post-Resurrection narratives might offer toward an understanding of obedience. Foundational to obedience is radical dependence on God. A stance of openness that flows out of relationship with God moves one to *disponibilidad* (radical availability). Radical openness and availability pertain to personal as well as communal discernment. In the latter part of the chapter I look at leadership and authority as well as the abuse of power.

In Chapter 9, I consider ministry and what these times ask of us in ministry. Looking around the world, the needs can seem endless. Our call is to discern, through the lens of our charism, the cries around us. From there, the who, what, where, when, and how of ministry emerge. We are not called to do this alone. The call is to work together. Reading the signs of the times is essential; we do this together as well as personally, sensing where the call is. We also do so with Gospel light, with freedom and our creative religious imagination that sheds further light for each next step.

This chapter looks at four areas of great need, with examples of where religious are at the peripheries and where they are being called to engage further.

Finally, Chapter 10 explores the ways in which charism asks us to look more deeply and widely at the call of our collaborators or partners in mission. The call is to see what the Spirit is calling us to now—together. The invitation is to widen our work within the charism of religious life and to continue to work together on common cause projects. The invitation is also to encourage all the members of our charism families to participate more fully and for all to participate from wherever the compelling initiative emerges. This is a transformation whereby religious families are all changed by the calls of the Spirit. It will also mean that all will be present at the table of participation and discernment. This requires a new attitude, and perhaps a new virtue: *participatory solidarity*.

Throughout this book I invite readers to the conversations we must have if religious life is to continue living its mystical, prophetic call today. Each chapter includes questions for reflection and discussion.