

Religious Motivation and Community Life Among Women Religious in Bangalore

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Abstract

Religious life, as any other vocation, has its rewards as well as challenges. One of the serious challenges facing the Women Religious Congregations can be placed under the umbrella term vocation crisis. It is a phase in life where, those who have made their vows to live in religious communities experience difficulty to cope with the challenges and demands of that way of life. This paper is the outcome of an explorative study conducted through the 'snowball sampling' technique conducted among 130 women religious in Bangalore city. The factors investigated in the study were religious motivation, Community life - behaviors in the community, communication patterns, inter-personal relationships, impact of conflicting religious practices and issues affecting the quality of religious life. Religious motivation was found to be moderately low affecting the quality of religious life. The results expose a crisis in the life of women who have spent several years in religious life than the new recruits pointing towards the inevitability of thorough renewal at every stage of religious life.

Introduction

From time immemorial there were men and women, who were inspired by the example of others or urged by an inner call, who opted for a radical way of following Jesus Christ, in order to belong to Him with an undivided heart (1Cor 7:34). Religious life is a choice one makes through

a public profession to belong to institutions or communities that are called Orders or Congregations that are legitimately approved by the Church. Many men and women have lived and continue to live such lives responding to the situations of the Church and world according to their ability. Religious Orders are now invited to reexamine their founding charisms, to rekindle their energy levels and to make their presence tangible (Rayen, 1984). Pope Francis declared the year 2015 as the year of the Consecrated Life and has appealed the Religious men and women 'to wake up the world' to be witnesses of a different way of doing things, of acting and of living (Francis, 2015). The seminal spirit of Pope Francis's words demands an awakening of oneself before attempting to awaken others.

From the very beginning of their formation, the women religious are instructed to say no to the attractions of the world, urges of their body and the evils that exist in the material world (Hippo, p. 397). In every age the religious considers cross as the superabundance of God's love poured out upon this world (Paul, 1996) and this is considered the saving presence of Christ in particular in the midst of trials. In difficult situations; even at the cost of one's life; a religious is called to bear witness to this Love. The effects of such sacrifices in life are the meekness of a hidden life, sharing hardships, loneliness and a life far from appreciation and authority. The religious are constantly reminded that there is no lasting city on earth.

Women religious are called to contribute actively in the life of the world while not imbibing to the values of the world (John, 2002). According to the census the world catholic population has reached 1.214 billion at the end of year 2011, an increase of 18 million or 1.5%. However, the number of religious women showed a sharp decline from the year 2000 (8,01,185) to the end of year 2008, which was 7,39,067. According to the Vatican statistics in the year 2011 the number of women religious has gone down to 7,13,000 (Glatz, 2013). The number of religious women has been declining drastically from a million worldwide in 1973 to 710,000 today (McKenna, 2013). The Indian situation is not different. Kerala, one of the States in India that contributed a large chunk of women religious, reported a reduction of 70-75% in women joining religious life (Sangamam, 2015).

It is observed that some men and women who made their vows of chastity, poverty and obedience, live in religious communities feel that they are no longer able to cope with the demands and challenges of the way of life they have chosen. As a result members in the religious institutions are coming out openly disclosing their challenges and the

inner conflicts. It shows life has its moments of joys and sorrows, flaws and weaknesses and no religious men and women are exempted from them (Kennedy, 2011).

Faced with varied and pressing issues that sometimes seem to compromise or even overwhelm the religious life (Paul, 1996) it is important to understand and respond positively to the needs of the society and the demands of women religious as individuals. The quest for God and the desire to serve humanity does not purge the needs of a religious woman in flesh and blood. It is the duty of each individual to build oneself first and foremost to build the world anew. It is indispensable for individuals to find meaning in their life and to fulfill their bio-psycho-social needs, though some of the needs are altruistically sacrificed because of the nature of their vocation. If not motivated from the very beginning of religious formation such concepts may bring frustration and helplessness in religious life, especially because the candidates to religious life come from a world where the needs and wants of life are gratified immediately.

The origin of religious vocation is the outcome of an encounter with Christ in faith (Arrupe, 1979). Lack of vocations and the discontinuation of those who join the religious life may be primarily due to their inability to encounter Christ in the daily events of their life. It is observed that lack of confidence in the program of formation - both initial and the ongoing formation - causes more or less an ambiguous situation. The absence of objective evaluation leads inadequate formation (Arrupe, 1979). Often those who are in charge of formation are lacking proper training to deal with the issues of youngsters adequately. Crisis begins at the initial phase itself. Those who are in the formation team should know the spirit and charisma of their congregation. They should know the meaning and value of being a true religious and if necessary there should be a competent team of formatters since the complexities of today's youth need experts and specialists to handle their issues (Arrupe, 1979).

The challenges of the women religious may also be understood through Maslow's concepts of hierarchy of needs. Each level of human needs (Maslow, 1943) has to be met if the person has to pass to the next levels of fulfilling needs. It is indispensable that women religious meet their primary needs during their life in religious congregations. Unfortunately even the secondary level needs, namely the need of security, love and belongingness are not often met in the way it has to be. They are neither trained to deal with the human challenges of not meeting them. If we accept as true what Maslow proposed, it is not easy

for women religious to reach the supreme level of self-actualization and thereby lead people to reach that ultimate level. At present the main concern of formation is to live up to the ideal. Hence the needs, wants and desires of the real self of those in formation are neither taken care of nor adequately trained to deal with according to the challenges of the vocation. The women religious often find themselves in conflict with the ideal and the real. They struggle to find meaning in their chosen life.

The present day formation programs are often inadequate to train the aspirants to become fully developed, open to the realities of the world, integrated, mature, contented, fulfilled and happy human beings. However the unfortunate reality of religious life is that in various dimensions a significant number of religious women are diminished, frustrated, traumatized by interior conflicts, bitter and sometimes interiorly destroyed (Azevedo, 1986). Ambiguous definitions of the vocational options for the women religious, neutralization of their traditional values and natural qualities, denial to pursue a solid intellectual and cultural formation are real challenges of women religious in addition to the experiences of being kept on notoriously inferior levels of education, irregular and inconsistent professional formation and preparation for the task to be fulfilled.

The absence of a serious theological, biblical and ecclesiological foundation for religious life, exclusive and individualistic focus on perfection and salvation and an accentuated lack of information of the world - its problems, evolution and transformation - from which the religious try to remain unrealistically distant and sheltered (Azevedo, 1986) are the few things which make vocations at stake and the impact of religious life not felt in the communities.

This study was envisaged on the basis of experiences shared by women religious who were not able to follow their personal inspiration to be a nun because of the over-involvement of authorities in their life, struggle with the choice of mission, place, insensitivity of community members towards injustice, gossips, jealousy, grudge and anger that were detrimental to their zeal. There are only minimal scientific researches done on the psychosocial issues of the women in the context of religious life and that too deals not much about their bad experiences. However, in communities where women religious are at work, they have a lot to talk about their issues. There is a dearth of scientific evidences regarding their problems and also mechanisms to handle them systematically. This paper is the outcome of the need assessment carried out to develop renewal programs that could enable women religious to be more focused and contribute within their vocation. The

objectives of the study were to assess the socio demographic details of women religious in context, understand their community living, communication patterns and interpersonal relationship and the levels of religious motivation before and after their religious commitment through the vows. This study also considered the factors which lead them to vocation crisis. This paper is meant to help readers and the members of religious communities to have a realistic view of religious life and to prepare and to get equipped with appropriate measures to enhance the meaning in religious life.

Methods

The city of Bangalore is known as 'Mini-Vatican' in India with the highest number of women religious from various national and international congregations. For this study one hundred and thirty (130) women religious from 20 different congregations in Bangalore were interviewed. Using snowball sampling method, women religious who have attended at least one renewal program were contacted. Permissions to interview the nuns were given by the respective mother superiors. Semi structured interview schedule which was developed on the basis of Focused Group Discussions (FGD) with fifteen women religious from different religious congregations and review of literatures were used to collect data. The researcher assured them confidentiality in matters of the name of the participants as well as the name of the congregations and got special permission to use the data for the academic purpose. Analysis included descriptive statistics, frequencies, and correlation, using SPSS 17.0 version.

Results

Socio demographic data of the participants: The age is ranging from 21 years to 51 years of age. 74 (56.9%) of them belonged to the age group of 21-30 years, 25 (19.2%) to 31- 40 years, 16 (12.3%) to 41-50 years and 15 (11.5%) to 50 and above years. 57.6 % (75) of the women religious have undergraduate degree, and 25% (33) of them have completed their post graduate study. PUC (Pre University Certificate) is the basic educational qualification used for the admission of the candidate to a religious congregation. 52 (40%) of the respondents are students which justifies the fact 17% (22) of them are having only basic qualification. Only one person of the total population has gone for higher studies like M. Phil or PhD. This is a noteworthy data because education has a vital role to play in the overall personality of the individual. 50% (65) of the given population are engaged in studies probably preparing themselves to pursue their professional courses later. 28% (36) of the

women religious are involved in the field of nursing, 17% (22) are in teaching and only five percent (seven) of the total population is engaged in the activities like social action or social justice. 92 girls (71%) opted religious life between the age of 15-18 years and this is a commonly observed factor. 25 girls (19%) opted for religious life between the age of 19 to 22. Those who joined the religious life between the age of 23-26 years constitute 9% (12). 23% (30) of the participants had 6-10 years of professed life in the congregation where as 22% (29) of women had five years. There remaining group has led 10 to 15 years of religious life in their respective congregations. The data also shows that 16.9% (22) of participants have 26 years of experience as a religious.

Community life: 108, (83.1%) women religious were convinced and happy about the fact that community life played a major role in their life. However 16.2% (21) only could specify the role of community experience in their life. 94 (72.3%) of women religious in general agreed to be looking forward to spend time with the community for meals and recreation. However, a quarter of them 34 (26.2%) spent time with the community in spite of other duties and 20 (15.3%) of them did not spend time with the community during the leisure time.

40% (52) of women religious said that they are regulated and restricted in the usage of the means of communication irrespective of their position they held in their congregation. 30 (23.1%) reported that they are completely prohibited from the usage of communication modes such as telephones, mobiles, internet etc. In contrast to this, it was found that 40 (30.8%) of them were able to use any means of communication in any situation.

Only 73 (56%) of the women religious felt that the community members irrespective of their languages and culture accepted them. 71 (54.6%) of the women religious agreed that they were psychologically affected by the criticisms of the dominant community members.

While 51 (39.2%) of the participants agreed that group-based unhealthy activities and partiality existed in their communities which destroy the beauty of their vocation, 49 (37.7%) have no such experience in their community. It was found that more than two thirds (79, 61%) of the members in the community did not know much about their fellow members and 19 (14.6%) of them admitted to be sorry for not knowing their fellow community members beyond few lines. This may be related to the fact that 6 (4.6%) of the women religious had difficulties in relating with the members and 34 (26.2%) of them kept themselves away because of the groupism that existed in the community. It was alarming to discover that 55 (42.3%) of the women religious reported that other

members had hostile attitudes in relationship with community members and rest of them were cordial to each other. 28 (21.5%) of the women religious agreed to the fact of having conflicts and were able to sort them out with fellow members, which was a good sign of relating with each other. 89 (68.5%) of them reported that they are capable of handling the conflicts and misunderstandings they come across. 13 (10%) of the women religious were not able to handle conflicts and misunderstandings that they are concerned with.

It was reported by 64 (49.3%) that injustice did exist in communities among groups of members in the communities, which is ignored by 41% (53) of women religious, whereas 33.1% (43) responded 'somehow' and 16.2% (21) strongly fought against such injustices in community life. 59 (45%) of the women religious felt that they would be supported by the community when they are in crisis irrespective of differences and conflicts where as 61, (47%) of them did not feel that way. 10 (8%) of the women religious were sure that they would not be supported by the community when they would be in problem situations.

Religious communities as platforms of growth - as responsible and full individuals were not found to be an agreeable statement by 79 (61%) of the woman religious, indicating that one third of the women religious only agreed to have opportunities for individual development in the religious life.

Religious Motivation

The motivating factors to become a nun included passionate love for God (49, 38%), influence of parents and teachers (41, 31.5%), felt need to serve humanity (32, 24.6%) and a belief that religious life would make them holy (16, 12.3%).

19% (25) of the woman religious indicated that they have thoughts that raised questions about their choice of religious life at certain points of times whereas only one percent admitted that they regretted about the choice they made about the religious life all the time. Though 94 (72%) women religious strongly agreed to be happy with their current life as a religious, one third (33, 25.3%) had ups and downs in their convictions of being happy in the religious life.

21.5% (28) of the participants considered the choice as a mistake in their life, 3.8% (5) still confused about the choice. Only 9.2% (12) of them reported that they received a sense of purpose in life through the reading the Bible.

More than half of the participants (69, 53.1%) prefer to continue in their

vocation, while half of the participants (60, 46.9%) at least once thought of quitting. Among the people who thought of discontinuing this way of life reported inability to find fulfillment in personal and religious life (26, 20%), health and adjustment issues in communities (15, 11.5%), less restrictions and wider opportunities of the outside world (12, 9.2%), and inability to find meaning in repeated prayers (8, 6.1%).

When 31.8% (41) of the women religious strongly agreed that they were able to find quality time for spiritual matters, 68.4% (89) of them reported that it was difficult to find any other time in their prayer life other than set in the timetable. However, 25 (19.2%) of the women religious agreed that spiritual matters often take a back seat in their routine life. 80% (104) of them wanted to be trained in identifying meaning and fulfillment as an individual religious.

The religious life demands the need to distinguish the difference between exclusive and inclusive friendship (Brown, 1998), hence women religious are not expected to have exclusive friendships because of their call to love Christ with an undivided heart. However, 12.3% (16) of the women religious have very exclusive friendships either with priests or nuns from the same or other communities. 39.2% (51) of them reported that they were not able to completely isolate themselves from friends and families irrespective of the demands of religious life. 13.1% (17) agreed to be strongly involved in exclusive friendships with other members/laymen in the society.

The assessment score on the levels of religious motivation revealed that 2% (3) of the women religious have low, 92% (119) moderate and 6% (8) high level of motivation.

The results showed significant correlation between high religious motivation levels with better interpersonal relationship among the women religious ($p=.007$) and community living experiences ($p=.003$, Pearson correlation=.259). The results in addition found that as the age progressed the motivation level decreased ($p=.021$, Pearson correlation=-.202) and the years spent in the religious life or the educational qualifications did not show any significant associations with the religious motivation levels.

Discussion

This study is important in context of the changing scenario in religious vocations, though the findings cannot be interpreted as factors responsible for decreased religious vocation. The situation currently is challenging among the women religious that a change needs to be

brought in which is thoughtful, imminent, and reasonable. The results indicate fluctuating perceptions and indicators of happiness in the choice they made about their life. Further it needs to be understood that these changing responses were their fluctuating minds about what they have chosen. It is important to bring about a transformation in the religious role that they may be fully developed and be able to find meaning and happiness in the life they have chosen. Specific policies of formation among congregations seem to be different and some congregations have moved forward to the changing demands of sustaining vocations. The results also question the role and contribution of community living experiences in the development and growth of individual members as responsible, spiritual and fully developed persons.

Religious community is expected to be a family where all are loved, respected, accepted and defended. Religious authorities need to make changes and train the women religious to live in a way that nurtures their spiritual and religious life they have opted to live is the need of the hour. Handling interpersonal issues, developing better interpersonal relationships in the communities should be the prime focus of training or renewal programmes. Communities that are meant to be safe, reassuring and nurturing ground for the religious are perceived as places of conflicts, injustice and above all contexts that devalue the self worth, development and the purpose of their vocation. Unhappy religious can make the community life miserable even for others. Pope Francis also tells the religious that they are expected to be experts in communion. He asks the religious to think about his frequent comments about criticism, gossip, envy, jealousy and hostility which should have no place in religious houses.

Religious motivation is a driving force (Cornner, 1995) that enables a person to choose religious life. Religious training should help an individual to discern so as to which way of life to choose and how to make it fruitful. What makes the religious women spiritual and beneficial to the society can be detected by the activities they are involved in. The most important contributing factor to the happiness of religious women is their relationship with God through prayer and other spiritual activities. The results indicate that spiritual needs to be met and the hunger for spirituality should be created further for those who have chosen this life. Spirituality is all about being and becoming which is not the quest of a religious woman alone, but of all human beings.

There is an increasing need to respond to the emotional, social, spiritual and interpersonal issues of women religious for enhancing quality of

life in these areas. In dealing with the issues of women religious, it is important to see the potentials and challenges of the individual rather than handling it in an idealistic way. Religious motivation levels need an assessment for those in the formation as well, to understand their motivation levels and apply strategies to improve motivation when it is dangerously low. Motivation for spiritual activities should be strengthened; the woman religious need more support in continuing the vocation they chose at a very young age.

This study also enables us to relook at the ongoing formation (juniorate) programmes that could equip the young religious to respond positively to the demands and challenges of modern life. Dialogue between the members and higher authorities could be ensured in all the congregations which would provide a platform for new ideas and opportunities that discusses and deals with dissatisfied and compromised life that bears no fruits. Each of the congregations could adapt their own strategies for continuous appraisals to improve the quality of religious life. It needs a real wake up call to work on the formation curriculum in religious congregations which relooks at a training that allows everyone to feel the sense of closeness, concern and relationship, ability to overcome adversities by developing a sense of acceptance and being wanted (Micheal 2005).

Limitations

The research has not touched upon few important factors of religious such as financial involvements, physical and mental health aspects of life. Because of the confidential, sensitive and restricted nature of the group, adequate literatures were not available. Time constrains restricted in-depth understanding of the various factors and its inner connectivity.

Conclusion

The study strongly recommends life enhancement programmes through the existing renewal programme in addition to in depth empirical research in the area with the support of individual congregations and the church. It is necessary to sustain the good will and desire of woman religious who dedicate their life for the service of all by dealing with the issues affecting their motivation, community life and ministry which give way to dissatisfaction and crisis. This paper adds a base for the further empirical studies on the subject including interventions at different levels. The authors recognize that religious life surely be fulfilling if lived with passion for Christ, humanity and the members of the community.

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