

The God-Quest and the Gift of Religious Life to the Church

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Abstract

This essay describes a certain disconnection between the experience of women religious in the US and the Vatican's official statements. It notes the distance between the lived experience of women religious in the depth of their contemplative living and the connection between the way they experience God/Jesus both in prayer and in ministry. It draws on the work of Sandra Schneiders on religious life and the God-quest and the feminist cultural and theological insights of Ivone Gebara and Mary Jo Leddy. It places a single-hearted relationship with God at the heart of religious vocation and connects this with ministerial creativity and fresh ways of understanding God in the present context. Thus, it links the mystical and the prophetic, and engagement with culture and the concrete suffering of others.

Introduction

How can we talk meaningfully about religious life as a gift to faith communities? In 2001, The Sacred Congregation for Religious issued an instruction, "Starting Afresh from Christ: A Renewed Commitment to Consecrated Life in the Third Millennium." This was the five-year follow up to *Vita Consecrata* from which this document cites extensively and does not supplant. While "Starting Afresh" teaches nothing really new, it identified the most important challenge to religious life as "a renewed commitment to the spiritual life - starting afresh from Christ in adhering to the Gospel and living the spirituality of communion in a unique way." (2001: #4.) One way of describing this theme is that

religious life is a symbol or sign within communities of faith of what the whole church is meant to do and live. While only forms of consecrated life embrace vows of celibacy, poverty, obedience, and service, the very lives and being of religious remind everyone of our common call to holiness, a God-focused life, and a total commitment to Christ through a gospel way of living regardless of our particular life-contexts.

A spirituality of communion suggests highly developed skills and commitments to maintain conversations that unify, respect and engage the other - a way of living in mutuality and relatedness. In an ecclesial perspective, the dicastery most likely means complete docility to all the hierarchical authorities and structures that constitute the current organization of the church and that make a spirituality of communion quite impossible. I assume religious women, particularly, are developing the skills and commitments to the circles of communion and conversation in a mutuality of interdependence that are required because renewed communities have done so internally for some time. But to do so in the larger institution, all of us are challenged to overcome our own internalized versions of hierarchy.

When I read some of these documents, they often feel quite distant from my experience as a woman and as a religious in the church. On the one hand, the church affirms and supports the main lines of renewal and transformation in religious life. It recognizes its truly prophetic quality, its God-rootedness, its Christic specification. On the other hand, the church is fearful and anxious about our experience and evolving life-form.

Religious have and continue to engage in dual practice and in dialogue with non-Christians and non-Christian religions. We embrace more easily than the institutional church an openness and exploration in these directions that is, indeed, pursued in mutuality. We bring a deeply contemplative experience and an identity that is shaped by the Jesus story and experience of Jesus, yet we also seek to learn from other traditions. We recognize we do not have all the answers. We are fiercely creative in mission, developing new ministries that touch the most vulnerable and the poor, such as affordable housing, transitional housing projects, prison ministries, concern for the frail elderly, eco-justice and ecologically sustainable approaches to developing and managing our own motherhouse properties and other land properties. Spirituality ministries continue to flourish, and some religious are returning to education, parish, and health-related ministries. Our ministries, inspired by our direction and mission statements often extend far beyond the boundaries of the Catholic and Christian

communities. We reach out to believers and non-believers alike in great diversity both in terms of the populations we serve as well as those with whom we minister. And we have changed as a result. We imagine our place in the church and our place on the margins of our own society differently. Yet the church as institution is often anxious about these more permeable boundaries and increasing variety of circumstances.

The ordinary person in the pew is perplexed and often nostalgic in an uncritical way for who we used to be and what we used to do. John Fialka's book, *Sisters: Catholic Nuns and the Making of America*, betrays these biases (2003). While his narrative is appreciative and engaging, highlighting in an accessible and almost sensational way the extraordinary contribution Catholic sisters have made to the American church, the story remains a narrative of deeds. The accounts of the renewal years and of interviews with articulate and visionary leaders in religious life betray a lack of comprehension about the life itself. He fails to understand the interior relationship with God, the deep sense of belonging to a religious community with a shared purpose, and creativity toward the future. In the end, he is worried about the American church's losing the contribution of sisters as we vanish from the scene.

Although he chronicles a number of poignant power struggles between men in the church and women religious, he fails to recognize the depth and pervasiveness of sexism and clericalism underlying these dynamics. This is what impedes sisters (and other women) from claiming a new place in the church and her mission despite the fact that many of us do. Are we vanishing and declining? Or to draw on Mary Maher's insight in her plenary address (2004) at the Religious Formation Conference Jubilee event in St. Louis, are we part of a deeper transformation of this life-form? And what difference does it make if we believe so? Is there something being born as well as something dying? And in the end, does not our deepest meaning lie in who we are more than in what we do? As we change, as the church changes, and as ministry more clearly belongs to everyone in the church, do we not still serve the church and society through our consecrated lives?

However, as Americans in a culture that values deeds and doing over lives and living, do we believe in our lives ourselves? Without church and culture validating our life-form, do we validate it for ourselves out of our own experience of call and mission? Do we have the courage to recognize the cultural influences that erode or obscure core aspects of our lives and develop creative ways to resist them? If we can do so - both validate our unique life-form and resist the forces that obscure

and discourage us - is not this the gift we offer to faith communities beyond the boundaries of Roman Catholicism and to our world as well?

Sandra Schneiders describes religious life this way: "Religious Life is a prophetic life-form in the Church whose prophetic character is rooted in and derives from the celibate solitude that unites contemplative immediacy to God and solidarity with the marginalized of society and expresses itself in the vows that address to the world the challenge of the reign of God." (2001:126).

Consecrated Celibacy at the Heart of the God-Quest

Schneiders restores renewed emphasis to life-long consecrated celibacy as the most constitutive feature of religious life. She describes the meaning of consecrated celibacy as "a love relationship between the religious and Christ, lived in the context of the church and the congregation, orientated toward the service of one's brothers and sisters" (2000:129).¹ Thus, the life-form is alone, single, but not isolated. There is an existential solitude that constitutes the life. She goes on from there to develop the mystical core of this celibacy.

Religious life is organized around this single-minded God-quest, an affective concentration of the whole of one's life on union with God. The aloneness of this life finds its meaning in contemplative prayer. This is not an easy choice and/or an easy life. But religious life is not comprehensible at all if it is not essentially contemplative. As religious we cannot hope to live this central aspect of our consecration, our affective dedication to God and the pursuit of this union with God without contemplative prayer. Yet how difficult it is to preserve, nourish and foster the contemplative dimension of our lives in the press of the immediate needs of our communities and our world, and the sensibility created by postmodernism! There is at the heart of the God-quest an on-going, deepening, existential experience of searching for God, immediacy to God, and a sense of having been found by God, claimed by God, and called by God to this life-form. It consists in a constant remembering of not only who we are but Whose we are. The oddness of this life-form and its social marginality combined with its contemplative immediacy to God undergird the life as prophetic. "Despite the bewilderment and empty stumbling" (Dillard, 98), of this quixotic God-quest in our particular moment of history within US culture, there remain profound moments of contemplative awareness

¹ See also her robust description of the prophetic character of religious life and her account of the recent Apostolic Visitation of US apostolic religious by the Vatican in *Prophets in Their Own Country* (2011).

and fullness. In many of us there is a deep longing for this single-mindedness and clarity of focus. Mary Lou Kownacki captures this mystical undergirding of solitary contemplation oriented toward service in this poem written to honor Sr. Joan Chittister, OSB.

Scholastica: Mystic
How can I possibly sleep
And miss the morning star?
Come, brother Benedict,
Let us light incense
And chant the sutra

Awake,
Totally aware,
My knees turn weak
From God's long, open-mouthed kiss.

How can I describe Your presence:
A dab of precious perfume
Behind my left ear.
All day long your scent intoxicates me.
How others are drawn to nibble
On my ear! (2001: 88-89)

This poem captures a sense of contemplation for its own sake. Dorothee Soelle would describe the quality of mystical experience in this poem as one of amazement. For Soelle, mysticism that leads to solidarity and resistance begins not in the prophetic action of denunciation but in appreciation, in amazement and praise for the wonder of what is. The movement toward justice-making follows (2001:77-93). This approach is very close to that of Mary Jo Leddy (2003) in her book, *Radical Gratitude*, a profound cultural analysis of the north-American attitude of perpetual dissatisfaction fueled by capitalism and the need to earn self-worth through achievement. The antidote to these culturally manipulated feelings of inadequacy, of lack of abundance is gratitude.

Gratitude leads to a generosity of heart and an entirely different economy of grace. God's economy of grace is based on fullness of life and abundance. God does not love us conditionally or one more than another. God loves all of us all of the time. Both spiritualities (Soelle's and Leddy's) begin in radical appreciation for what is, for what has already been given in the gift of life itself, and that is enough. When we fully receive the gift, enter into amazement and gratitude, action follows on its own.

The poem, *Scholastica: Mystic*, embodies such an attitude, how can I miss the morning star? Sheer appreciation for creation's beauty! "Let us light the incense and chant the sutras" – inter-religious symbols for reverencing the sacred and praising God through reciting an unnamed wisdom text. In this posture of appreciative reverence, one becomes awake, totally aware. Crossing over to the language of the Buddha, enlightenment is becoming totally awake, mindful, fully aware in the present moment. Crossing back to Christianity, the narrator plunges us into erotic love mysticism - going weak-kneed from "God's open-mouthed kiss." Behind Scholastica's voice we hear the bride in the "Song of Songs," "Kiss me with the kisses from your mouth."

And immediately the poem shifts toward its evangelizing mission. "How can I describe your presence?" This embrace of God, this long kiss is not for oneself alone, but the abbess herself exudes this presence in the precious perfume. While she continues to be intoxicated by this whiff of perfume throughout the day, others are inexplicably drawn to her to sense a God-presence they cannot yet name. This apostolic element is already signaled by Scholastica's invitation to her brother. "Come, brother Benedict." A relationship of mutuality and kinship is evoked. An invitation to shared worship and shared awakening is suggested. All of this suggests a true spirituality of communion, inter being, mutuality and presence.

This brings us immediately into the God question. Who is God? What is God like? From this perspective of appreciative amazement and a sense of the abundance of life itself rather than from a specter of scarcity, does our sense of God have enough influence on us to draw us from protective self-sufficiency to self-transcendence? Once we may have recognized that the way we understood God and related to God no longer held such power, what have we come to believe and understand about who God might be? Once we have been deeply affected by penetrating social analysis that reveals how religions and North Americans have and still do create God in their own image - an image that justifies the exclusion of some, the abandonment of some, the powerlessness of some, the suffering of some at the expense of others - who has God become for us? Once we discover how much sexism and racism have seeped into our theology and our language about God and the way these "isms" permeate church communities, who has God become for us? In the context of the new story of the universe, who has Creator God become for us?

In naming the most important spiritual question of our times, Sandra Schneiders (2001) arrived at the conclusion that "God is the Question

and God is the Answer.” That underlying our struggle between self and Other, the besetting problem is our lack of self-transcendence. This is how she puts it:

For who or what, finally, can compete with my own sense of value, my own instinct of self-preservation, my own need to have and be all that I can be in the one and only life I will have to enjoy, but is ultimate in a sense I cannot claim to be even to myself? Only something that so relativizes myself that it awakens me to the genuine value of the Other as an autonomous center of subjectivity, that does not derive from or reflect upon me, can pull me out of the quagmire of self-absorption into the radiant light of other-centered love. Only something that truly transcends me, that is evidently the only real Center of the universe, is capable of decentering me and therefore relating me appropriately to everything else. Only from such a decentered point of view can the Other truly come into focus, not as an extension of, a support for, an annoyance to, or a competitor with myself, but as an equal who makes a claim upon me that is as important as my claim to be the center of my universe. The only such value, finally, is Love, the infinite self-giving outpouring of goodness that Christians recognize as God, for “God is love, and those abide in love abide in God and God abides in them” (1 John. 4:16). (71).

I believe this is also a serious cultural issue as well. Perhaps we cannot get to the God question effectively until we can see through our cultural lenses to another perspective - one that includes more of the world, more of the experience of women, especially poor women, and one that is more truthful about the dynamics of power that maintains the status quo in religion and in society. Here I am deeply indebted to Mary Jo Leddy’s *Radical Gratitude* (2003) and Ivone Gebara’s book, *Out of the Depths: Women’s Experience of Evil and Salvation* (2003). Mary Jo Leddy analyses North American consumerist culture as generating increasing dissatisfaction. She asserts that being grateful for what is instead of being dissatisfied about what I do not have or have not achieved creates a sense of sufficiency. The life I have been given is enough to begin with and enough to go on. Instead of needing to be more or do more, the gift of life is enough. To set limits on the spirit of craving and dissatisfaction liberates us into a new sense of power. To discover and affirm I am enough just as I am with my strengths and weaknesses leads me to believe that I can make a difference. To affirm that I am good enough overcomes the vague guilt that dissatisfaction evokes in us and is the beginning of liberation. When we discover that we have enough, we enter freedom and happiness. This movement toward “I am enough” is transformative. It breaks the cycle in which each promise of happiness

is accompanied by an even deeper dissatisfaction. This shift releases new spirit, energy, and a sufficient happiness that supports the sense I can make a difference in the world (2003:52-53).²

This culture of dissatisfaction erodes our ability to believe in the love God offers us. Leddy continues:

The mystery of the economy of grace is that the quality of God's love is enduring and free. It breaks through any of our attempts to quantify or contain it. That which is forever and for free is for all. The economics of God's love is not based on a law of scarcity but rather rooted in the mystery of superabundance. The personal or political decision to declare that *there is not enough for all* is the beginning of social cruelty, war, and violence on a petty or vast scale. On the other hand, the choice to affirm that *there is enough for all* is the beginning of a social community, peace, and justice (2003: 57).

This cultural analysis may help us name ways we have absorbed this attitude of "dissatisfaction" that obscures the liberating freedom of an authentically embraced simplicity of life through our vow of poverty. It may help us stop striving to achieve more or be more than we can be and start making a difference now through the hopeful energy release from dissatisfaction yields. It may help us love the person in front of us, do the good we can do today if there is nowhere else we are driven to go.

The analysis Ivone Gebara (2003) offers of the evil poor women experience and participate in is original and penetrating. She focuses her attention on the category of gender injustice that is embedded in patriarchal societies and religion in Latin America. She draws on the ordinary experience of the women in the barrios with whom she has lived for years and on some narratives created by women. Through them she uncovers the evil women undergo, the evil women do, and the salvation and experience of God women discover in the midst of this suffering. I cannot do justice to this subtle and profound work that so devastatingly reveals the effects of sexism on women in society.

She primarily analyses Christian theological claims to show how wedded our theology is to the masculine, pretending to be universal and inclusive when at every turn it reinforces male power, prestige, and dominance. She argues for a theology of evil, salvation, and God that makes women visible. She does not want to replace a male system with a female system but rather create an entirely new system of thought that creates and supports new relationships between women and men in an

2 This passage is both direct citation and paraphrase.

awareness of the interrelatedness of all being, including our place in the cosmos. Her approach is always a both/and affair. How do we salvage the promise and insights of our tradition by correcting and enlarging them so that they do not maintain the oppression of gender injustice for women. As a theologian and a philosopher, Gebara reflects on the way language, culture, and systems of thought that do not explicitly include women as persons of equal value as men, actually maintain the multiple systems that oppress women. Since religion is a major resource supporting poor women in their sufferings, she analyzes how some theologies of the cross maintain and exacerbate these sufferings and points to ways through these impasses through her gender analysis.

North American religious are affected by the experiences of women in both cultures. If we live in the north, we are saturated by the messages from our consumerist culture that undermines our appreciation of and embodiment of our evangelical lives. At the same time, most of us have personal connections within our communities and beyond with the experience of sisters in Latin America. This often intensifies our guilt that we can not address every injustice we know about everywhere in the world.

This profound awareness of suffering and our own awareness and experience of gender injustice, I believe, has profoundly affected our experience of God and our relationship to Jesus as our religious lives have unfolded. Who is Jesus for us now? I could describe some of the major shifts in Christology that have affected us. But it might be more fruitful to reflect on this question yourself. How do you now characterize your relationship with Jesus? How do you as a woman or a man of whatever sexual orientation relate to Jesus now in your religious life? Is this an on-going, developing relationship? Is the mystery of incarnation, redemption, suffering, death, and resurrection expanding and taking some new shape in you? Is it contracting, disappearing from the center of consciousness being somehow eclipsed by some experience of the God to whom Jesus points? Is your experience more of God or the Trinity or of the Spirit or of Sophia right now? What parts of the Gospel are central? How do we experience ourselves living the Gospel? Is the Christian story the most important narrative that shapes our life? How has it been expanded or reinterpreted through our congregation's deep stories? Are there other cultural or religious or personal stories that open a new window into one or another scene in the Gospel? How do you describe the gift of Christianity to the world based on your understanding of Jesus? What is the stance of God toward the world and us as somehow God-identified women and men bearing that message

to our world in our lives?

To tease your imagination by once again crossing over to an image of “The Enlightened One” from Buddhism, I draw on another poem by Mary Lou Kownacki.

Hotei: The Enlightened One
Hurry, the enlightened one
Enters the city gates,
An old patched bag slung over a shoulder,

The enlightened one
Meets a hungry child
Reaches into the bag and bread appears.

In a golden carriage a bishop approaches,
A lightning bolt escapes the bag and strikes
Him to the ground, I’m blind, he cries.

Long lines of women gather
And tongues of fire fly from the bag
Into their mouths. They speak with new voice.

Representatives of the state appear
Armed for battle. Truth topples from the bag
And strips them naked.

An old woman pulls at the enlightened one’s robe,
Tears streaming from her eyes. Out of the bag
Comes a listening heart.

Oh, for that bag you should sell everything. (2001:89)

This poem represents the fruit of prayer and contemplation. Hotei responds to each representative group with exactly the right response that emerges spontaneously but no less dangerously from the simple bag slung over her shoulder. There is food for the hungry child; for the bishop blinding insight. I think of St. Paul, blinded when he fell to the ground from his horse by the power and illumination of the Spirit of Jesus. This poem suggests some of the tension women religious experience in relationship to the hierarchical church. We seem to inhabit entirely different worlds right now than many of our bishops and members of the curia. Our experiences have brought us to a different vision and a different way of interpreting the gospel and of exercising authority than a Euro-centric, male, clerical perspective. Hotei’s bag responds to women with the gift of “tongues of fire” that “fly from the bag into their mouths.” The result is “they speak with new voice.”

From the place of their own inner knowing and their contemplative depths, women are finding their voices and speaking with new voices. This new voice speaks truth to power whether in church or society. This new voice expresses new experiences of God and of the Gospel. When “representatives of the state appear, armed for battle, truth topples from the bag and strips them naked.” Would that this were so! The enlightened ones among us see through the deception, see through the violence, and see through the manipulation of our fear. In the poem that final symbolic situation is the weeping, old woman, pulling at the monastic robe. To this lament, “out of the bag flows a listening heart.” The response of the enlightened one is particular to each situation. It is a carefully differentiated response to the particular need presented. One needs insight, another truth, another food, another the ability to speak for oneself, and another a compassionate heart expressed through listening.

We are not so fortunate as to have the old patched bag of the enlightened one. “Oh, for that bag you should sell everything.” The poem suggests that each of us has the potential to become so enlightened through the contemplative effects of our own God-quest and our living a Gospel life. There are profound echoes of the Gospel in this poem. Jesus was such a teacher, such an enlightened one. The response comes from the intersection of immersion, compassionate presence, and wisdom. The enlightened one enters the city gate, returns to society from meditation and encounters each of these figures. From the purified vision, the result of contemplation and transformation, the enlightened one sees what is - contemplates and recognizes the deep need of each person or group who appears. I love the magic of the story - the bag does the discerning. But I would suggest that each one of us has had similar experiences of graced responses to the world’s needs. As we continue to reflect, might we offer listening hearts, hearts that are open to the struggle, the change, the search, the discoveries, the challenge and the mystery of religious lives and the gift they are to faith communities.

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