

# Religious Life: A Complete Change?

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Every human being undergoes constant renewal and adaptation; this is the law of nature. Throughout this constant change, the person nevertheless remains the same person. Disease impedes this process and if not cured, if renewal and adaptation is prevented, the person dies.

Religious life is not exempt from the need for renewal and adaptation; quite the contrary, the will of God expressed through the Church *demands* it. Renewal and adaptation of religious life is not a new, strange idea; founders of religious orders have throughout history, in order to meet the demands of their times, prudently introduced changes sanctioned by the Church.

Vatican II's decree *On the Adaptation and Renewal of the Religious Life*, rich in wise counsel, must be read in its entirety to appreciate its full value. Certainly it is to be expected and desired that many religious, young and old, will give expression to their non-passivity concerning the decree. As a result, many and varied articles on the adaptation and renewal of religious life, applying to its many facets, will appear. There is so much food for thought in the decree that quite lengthy articles may easily be written on almost every paragraph of the decree. For that very reason, this article will not be a running commentary on the entire decree.

Because any mention of renewal in religious life is such a sensitive area (some fearing that everything will change; others fearing that nothing will change), it will be well to begin by pointing out those areas of religious life that are subject to change and those that are not. Following that initial clarification, two aspects of religious life not only subject to renewal but urgently demanding it will be considered.

When speaking of religious life, one must be very careful not to use the words *renewal* and *change* as synonyms. Change, more often than not, means the replacing of some existing thing with some other completely different thing. Renewal and adaptation do not carry this

same meaning. *Renew* means to make new again, revitalize; *adaptation* means to make fit (new conditions). Neither of these necessarily suggest a complete break with the past.

Essential elements of religious life are subject to renewal and adaptation but not to change; others, the secondary elements, are subject to renewal, adaptation and, if necessary, change—even change in the strictest sense. Change merely for the sake of change is nowhere advocated in the decree.

Among the essential and unchangeable elements in religious life are the ends of each religious family: a general end and a particular end. The general end is the same for all—perfection in charity—firm, resolute tending toward perfect love of God and neighbor. The particular end varies from one religious family to another; it is the specific goal that each has received from its founder. These essentials must be left unchanged.

The adaptation and renewal of religious life includes both the constant return to the sources of all Christian life and the original spirit of the institutes . . . it redounds to the good of the Church that institutes have their own particular characteristics and work. Therefore, let their founders' spirit and special aims as well as their sound traditions . . . be faithfully held in honor. (par. 2)

The importance and necessity of contemplation in the life of every religious is reaffirmed by the decree: "it is necessary therefore that members of every community, seeking God solely and before everything else, should join contemplation . . . with apostolic love." Everyone wants to be in the presence of those whom they love, and love of friendship necessarily implies communication between friends—" . . . seeking God solely and before everything else. . . ." Through contemplation the religious unites himself to and communicates with his most intimate friend, God. Contemplation then flows from the perfect love of God to which every religious binds himself.

Contrary to notions generated by the popular press, the purely contemplative orders are far from being suppressed. So often we have heard that "cloistered monasteries are to tear down their walls and get with it—*do* something for the Church." Nothing could be farther from the spirit and letter of this wise decree. Such contemplative orders are subject to renewal, but they are instructed to renew and adapt while preserving their contemplative character.

Communities which are entirely dedicated to contemplation . . . retain at all times, no matter how pressing the needs of the active apostolate be, an honorable place in the Mystical Body . . . for these offer to God a sacrifice of praise which is outstanding . . . their manner of living should be revised . . . the contemplative life should be preserved with utmost care. (par. 7)

Those religious families who are not purely contemplative yet join a large degree of the contemplative aspect with the active apostolate are also counseled to retain this blend.

Some religious communities according to their rule or constitutions closely join the apostolic life to choir duty and monastic observances. These should so adapt their manner of life to the demands of the apostolate appropriate to them that they may faithfully observe their way of life since it has been a great service to the Church. (par. 9)

Another unchangeable element in religious life are, of course, the three vows of religion: obedience, poverty and chastity. By the vows of religion, the religious binds himself to strive unceasingly for perfection in love. Love is the wellspring of the virtue of religion—doing all things for God. One who enters the religious state is a professional religious, a “pro” in religious matters; his occupation virtue is religion. All things, big and small, are done for God. Every deliberate act of a religious should be an act of religion, a service for God. (It is from this virtue after all that religious get their name.) Whoever vows to be of constant service to God does this out of love and whoever vows to love God perfectly must love his neighbor.

If any man says I love God and hate my brother: he is a liar. For he who does not love his brother whom he sees, how can he love God whom he sees not. (I John 4:20)

Love is absolutely necessary for renewal; one cannot even begin to hope to accomplish worthwhile renewal of the externals of religious life unless internal renewal is its source. Love of God, love of neighbor—religious are professionally dedicated to this.

This renewal in love is urgently demanded by the decree; it is a renewal that is the duty of each member of the religious family—the religious family must be a true *family* and not one in name only.

Fraternal love must be obvious: “By this will men know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.” (John 13:35)

As members of Christ living together as brothers religious should give pride of place in esteem to each other and bear each other's burdens. For the community, a true family, gathered together in

the name of the Lord by God's love which has flooded the hearts of its members through the Holy Spirit, rejoices because He is present among them. (par. 15)

It is extremely difficult to grasp how one can enter religion, bind himself to *grow* toward perfect charity and then fail to show even the least basic respect for other members of the religious family. Temperaments and personalities vary from individual to individual. It is only when one makes himself the absolute norm that he begins to fail in his respect for others.

There are, of course, situations that arise even in religious life that will justify the withholding (at times) of expressions of fraternal love. These are too lengthy and complex to go into here. In religious life these instances should be rare and one's actions must be under the guidance of a superior or confessor who is aware of the conflicting situation. Never is the withdrawal of love itself justified.

" . . . religious should give pride of place in esteem to each other and bear each other's burdens." To *bear* each other's burdens implies many things; the most obvious is that one religious should not *become* a burden to another. Unfortunately, every religious family has some few members who make life uncomfortable for others in various ways. One popular type today is the amateur psychologist who is convinced that everyone else has "problems." Then, of course, there is the usual wit who thinks that because he injects "funny" remarks into his statements he can justly lower the esteem of another religious. There are others, too; all have this in common, that they not only do not bear others' burdens but pile on their own weight.

"For the community, a true family. . . ." The decree is insistent in several places on this essential notion of family life in a religious community. As is true of all situations, the family situation can flourish in the religious community only if it is wanted and nourished by all the members. Profession incorporates a religious into the religious family. From that time on all the ingredients that make up true family life must be present in the religious' life so that religious family life does not become a mere pseudonym.

The religious vows of obedience, chastity and poverty are essential to religious life. The true family situation emphasizes the positive aspects of these vows.

There is some questioning of the notion of authority and obedience today; some healthy questioning; some unhealthy questioning. Cer-

tainly we all see the absurdity of the classic example of the religious who is told by his superior to plant a broom in the yard and water it daily until it grows into an apple tree: "so the monk Bruno died at the age of ninety-two with his sprinkling can clutched to his breast." Far more absurd though are those who would reduce obedience to a situation that more than not resembles a superior humbly requesting on bended knee that the religious perform some task.

Because a religious community is a family, obedience should be much more spontaneous. Willingly (maybe pleadingly) did he vow; willingly does he keep his vow—and more happily when he sees it as an expression of love of God for the good of his family.

In the context of a religious family, a religious should see not only the necessity of obeying the father of that family, but also "to serve all their brothers in Christ, just as Christ himself, in obedience to the Father, served His brethren and laid down His life. . . ." (par. 14)

The religious family is a guardian of the vow of chastity. ". . . Let all, especially superiors, remember that chastity is guarded more securely when true brotherly love flourishes in the common life of the community."

Religious poverty is seen more positively from a family point of view. Material goods should be viewed as *family* property rather than as community property. There is much more waste and misuse of material goods in community life than there ever would be in family life. Religious poverty is an area of religious life in urgent need of renewal. This is a sensitive topic, yet, of the three counsels, poverty is the one that is most explicit in Sacred Scripture. However, with regard to the counsels, this has been the area of much confusion and unfortunately much rationalization.

There is no rationalization in the area of chastity; exactly what religious chastity involves is quite clear and universally agreed upon. There is, as has been pointed out above, some discussion today with regard to religious obedience but, after all is said and done, the subject obeys or is punished. And in the area of poverty, the decree has been quite explicit: "With regard to religious poverty it is not enough to use goods in a way subject to the superior's will, but members must be poor both in fact and in spirit." (par. 13)

*Poor in fact!* No longer can religious be "pack-rats" building up wardrobes of superfluous clothes, furniture, nik-naks and what have you. They must be poor in fact as a family and as individual mem-



bers of that family. The area of controversy is still as always: *What is poor?* On the one hand it does not mean that religious must be so absolutely destitute as to lack even the bare necessities of life, although it seems that that is permitted.

Religious communities have the right to possess whatever is required for temporal life and work unless this is forbidden by their rules and constitutions.

On the other hand, however, the same paragraph continues:

Nevertheless they should avoid every appearance of luxury, excessive wealth and the accumulation of goods. (par. 13)

Religious should diligently practice and if needs be express also in new forms that voluntary poverty . . . religious communities should readily offer a quasi-collective witness to poverty and gladly use their own goods for other needs of the church and the support of the poor. . . . (par. 13)

If it is difficult to say what being poor *is* (since it is relative), without a doubt one can say what being poor is not. Being poor is certainly not having the wealthiest looking house in the area. Large? Yes, if necessary. Well built? Of course. Clean? By all means! But rich looking? Never! Religious houses cannot justify possessing the richest ornaments in the area. The religious house cannot justify throwing large quantities of food in the garbage pail when families in the area go to bed hungry—and this does happen! If the religious house is unaware of that fact, that too is its fault. A religious cannot justify possessing a collection of sweaters, jackets, shirts, etc. while others continue to freeze. Civil welfare agencies have not dispensed religious from imitating Christ's love for the poor and concern for their needs. They have *vowed* to imitate Christ.

It may be objected that the word *possess* is very inaccurately used in the cases cited; that word was purposely chosen because *having permission to use* is a relationship between a religious and material goods that certainly appears to the average non-religious as possession. Someone possesses the material goods used by the religious. Who? The religious family. "This is not mine; I own nothing; it is for my use; it can be taken from me; it belongs to my family." But this argument, true as it is, can never convince a poor person who has no material goods to use. Poor families, in their ignorance of canonically legal poverty, can only judge what they see; for them a family possessing wealth plus members using it equals wealth.

Much more could be said about religious poverty, religious family life or the many other topics treated in the decree. It is most certainly hoped that all religious will read the entire decree and discuss means for adaptation and renewal on their proper local level. Individual renewal precedes any renewal of the whole community; renewal in love—love of God, love of neighbor—and more basically, renewal of spirit.

... even the best adjustments made in accordance with the needs of our age will be ineffectual unless they are animated by a renewal of spirit. (par. 2) An effective renewal and adaptation demand the cooperation of all the members. (par. 4)

The spirit of renewal and adaptation must be cultivated in the religious from his earliest years in religious life, in the novitiate. Novitiates themselves are by no means exempt from renewal and adaptation. The novitiate must be a solid foundation upon which the religious continually builds the rest of his life so that truly: the last day of a religious' life had better be his best!

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