II. THEOLOGICAL DEFINITION OF RELIGIOUS LIFE

Ministerial Religious Life is a Christian mystical prophetic lifeform, given to the Church by the Holy Spirit for the sake of the world, and constituted by perpetual Profession of consecrated celibacy, evangelical poverty, and prophetic obedience lived in transcendent community and ministry.

Obviously I cannot develop every aspect of this definition fully, but I do want to say something about each point and give particular attention to a couple points, especially the prophetic character of the vocation and its constitution by perpetual profession of the vows, because this is what makes the life publically recognizable in the Church as a distinctive lifeform. Its prophetic character is, as Pope Francis has said on several occasions, of its very essence, and Profession is the way Religious structure their life as an “alternate world”, a particular way of following Christ, that makes the life recognizable and effective in the Church and in the world.

A. Christian, mystical prophetic lifeform, given to the Church by the Holy Spirit, for the sake of the world.

1. First, Religious Life is a lifeform. I am drawing an analogy here from the realm of organic life as opposed to mechanical or artificial or social organizational forms. Living, that is, organic things are not composed of parts which are combined externally, the way we would put together a car or a professional organization. Living things, like plants and animals, have a unity that derives from their life, that flows from within rather than being imposed from without. Organic things are not made and unmade; they are born and they die. Their “parts” are not separable but integrally interrelated, united. In continuous interaction with each other, they express the life force of the living being. An organic being responds to, interacts with, and affects its environment rather than being merely situated within a context and passively impacted by what surrounds it. As the organism lives it changes and develops in response to its experience, sometimes quite radically, but it retains its identity throughout these changes. There is, for example, enormous difference between a person at the age of five and that same person at the age of fifty five, and even though we sometimes say about ourselves after a profound experience, “I am not the same person I was a year ago,” we are, in fact, precisely the same person because our identity, though modified by the experience, cannot be abandoned without our being destroyed. Thus, Religious Life has changed enormously throughout the centuries and quite radically since Vatican II. But it is still Religious Life. And that leads us to pose the question: what is it that constitutes that identity, that distinctiveness that enables us to recognize it as genuinely Religious Life even though we may be dressing and living community life and ministering in very different ways than we were in 1960 or than our communities were in 1860?

One of the implications of this organic definition of Religious life as a Life form is that it is a public phenomenon in the Catholic Church. We are not just a collection of individuals but the members of Religious Congregations. Religious life is not clerical. We are not mini priests or second class clerics or the priest’s helper, and therefore we are not part of the hierarchical structure of the Church. But we are a corporate and publicly recognizable lifeform in the Church. We have a right to define our life within the Church’s self understanding Of Catholic faith and to exercise a certain legitimate autonomy in regard to how we live and express our
consecration. But we are not simply private citizens within the Church. And because we hold a public place this has implications for our lives, both corporately and individually.

Another implication of the fact that Religious Life is a lifeform is that the **perpetuity of the life commitment** we make arises from the life itself, not from Canon Law or Church discipline. Unlike the commitment that a lay minister, for example, might make to a role in her or his parish from which the person could resign for any number of reasons, Religious do not “resign” from Religious Life any more than parents resign from parenthood or married people from matrimony. The perpetuity of the state of life, the lifeform, arises from the life itself, from the particular relationship to Christ that is at its centre, not from some external arrangements like joining a club or getting a job.

2. Secondly, this lifeform is a Catholic Christian lifeform. This might seem completely self-evident and non-problematic, but, in fact, for several reasons it is not, especially today. For one thing, we live in a much more ecumenical and interreligious context than Catholic Religious did in times past. Most religions, not only Orthodoxy and most mainline Protestant denominations, but also most non Christian religions and spiritual traditions including Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and others have some form of specialized spiritual life analogous to Catholic Religious Life. But it is not monastic practices such as asceticism, silence, contemplation, community life and so on which are not peculiar or exclusive to Catholic Religious Life that are central to our life but specifically Christian faith. Jesus Christ is at the center of Christian Religious Life and this poses a challenge to some Religious today. Our very involvement with non Christian traditions which are clearly not “false religions” but paths to salvation challenges our faith in Jesus as the savior not just of Christians but of the whole world.

A second challenge in this area, especially for women Religious, is the patriarchal domination of men in the Catholic tradition in which women are still secondclass citizens at best.

Thirdly, the new cosmology which calls into question the human centeredness of Christianity in the person of Jesus, is raising for many Religious difficult questions that cannot be simply ignored or denied.

However, despite these and other challenges, Religious Life is a Catholic and Christian lifeform. It is not a sect or a cult within the Church or an alternative to the Church, even though some orders throughout history, and even some to day, have acted like cults. Our Christian identity has important implications which cannot be bypassed or ignored. We cannot simply agree not to discuss certain topics or use certain language and trust (or hope) that everyone is working out these issues for him or herself.

a. The most important implication of our Christian identity is that the **Gospel is the basic rule of life** of all Catholic Religious. Vatican II reminded us of this very forcefully in *Perfectae Caritatis*, the decree on the renewal of Religious Life. No spiritual writing even of great saints or of our own founders, much less of later or contemporary writers, or even our own rules or customs or time honoured practices, constitute the fundamental rule of life of Religious. It is the Gospel. And this means that Jesus Christ is not simply an object of devotion among others, a moral model, or a spiritual ideal. Jesus is believed in and confessed with the faith of the universal Church as truly God and truly human and the Savior of the world. It is his Spirit, communicated to us in Baptism, which unites us in community and energizes us in ministry. Jesus is not, for the Religious, one of many admirable religious figures or founders but is the Son of God incarnate of whose body we are members.

b. Flowing from this Trinitarian and Christocentric character of our faith is a specifically **Christian morality, Catholic sacramental practice, and active participation in the**
Catholic community that are intrinsic to Catholic Religious Life. Religious Life, as we have already noted, is not a benevolent association of individuals practicing a variety of personal or idiosyncratic spiritualities while trying to make the world a better place. Religious are people trying to mediate into the world the saving reality that we live as Catholic Christian believers. This is not always an easy or comfortable position to be in today as the truly shocking scandals, sexual and financial and political, in the official Church become more and more visible and alarming. Women Religious often find male domination in the Church more difficult to put up with as their own feminist consciousness is raised. For some Religious ecclesiastical resistance to engaging the challenges arising from contemporary science, psychology, social developments, and especially from other religious traditions makes them uncomfortable identifying with some official Church positions. Pope Francis, in his genuine and fearless openness to the world, is a beacon of hope at the moment, but he is one force among many forces in the Church and many of those other forces are challenges to our faith and our hope.

c. However, one exciting and hopeful feature of contemporary Religious Life, precisely because it is, on the one hand, a public lifeform in the Church and, on the other hand, not a clerical or hierarchical lifeform, is that some Religious, especially women Religious, have become specialists in a kind of inclusive Catholicism. Without in any way alienating themselves from the Church or Catholic faith and practice, they are not afraid to engage currents in our contemporary world that some official representatives of the Church tend to hold in suspicion. Feminism, ecumenism, interreligious dialogue and even careful interreligious practice, ecological commitment with its basis in the new cosmology, the use of new therapies in healing ministries, and so on have found an increasing welcome among such Religious who have become, in places, the leading edge of the Church’s engagement with the contemporary world. This is not a welcome development, indeed it is cause for alarm, among those in the Church, whether hierarchy or laity, who think the Church should resist any real engagement with the world in which we live and the increasingly globalized culture of that world. Such people believe (or at least wish) that Religious, of all people, should be the first line of defense against anything that challenges traditional Catholic thought or behavior. Religious, in their judgment, should be the public face of a ghettoized institutional Catholicism, the enforcers of traditional theological and moral positions, even a kind of “temple police” riding herd on their fellow Catholics to insure conformity to what they believe are nonnegotiable Catholic positions. And this brings us directly to our next point.

3. Religious Life is a mystical prophetic lifeform in the Church. It is not primarily an institutional appendage of the hierarchy, either a work force for ecclesiastical projects or a disciplinary arm of the institution. Jesus, during his public life, had many and diverse followers. Some were temporary and some more permanent, some were celibate and others married, some were people in secular jobs and professions and others were clerics in the service of organized Judaism. But Jesus had a particular, small group of followers, women and men like Simon Peter and Mary Magdalene, whom he selected, called, and invited to leave everything parents and relationships, occupations, incomes, property, projects, and affiliations and to become his fulltime, lifelong companions. They were called by Jesus to go about with him on a fulltime and permanent basis, sharing his itinerant lifestyle including his homelessness and poverty, living from a common purse, apprenticing themselves to him and imbibing his interpretation of the Jewish religion. They were related to Jesus the way disciples were to a Jewish rabbi or teacher, modelling their lives on his, assisting him in ministry, and eventually, after his Resurrection carrying on his mission not just to Israel but to the whole world.

This group of fulltime disciples is the best Gospel prototype of Religious Life that we have. Characteristic of Jesus’ life which these disciples took up as their own was its particular
combination of contemplative or mystical union with the one Jesus called his “Abba” and with whom he claimed to be one, whose will was the norm of his life, to whom he was united by and in deep prayer, and a ministry that was not hierarchical or official but prophetic, modelled on that of Moses and the great prophets of the Old Testament, especially Jeremiah. This is the lifeform which Religious have chosen in response to a personal call from Jesus like that he issued to the Twelve and the other itinerant disciples including the women from Galilee whom Luke tells us went about with Jesus in his public ministry. Like that of Jesus and his original band this mystical prophetic life is a fulltime, itinerant, ministerial life that involves the free renunciation of family (both the family of origin and the family one might found) and of a stable home, personal possessions of all kinds, and control of one’s lifestyle and ministry.

The mystical prophetic character of Religious Life has, historically, and even today, often been the source of tension between Religious and the officeholders in the institutional Church. Prophecy and institution, in Jesus’ day and in our own, have never been entirely comfortable bedfellows. The prophet draws his or her identity and mission directly from the contemplative union with God which is at the heart of this vocation, not from appointment or delegation by ecclesiastical authorities. Often enough prophetic ministry passes over, under, around, or past the requirements or arrangements of law and institution. This is not because the prophet is a scofflaw or has no respect for authority or institutions. It is because, as we see in the life of the Old Testament prophets and clearly in the life of Jesus, law and institutions sometimes, even often, do not cover all cases, or cannot be applied in some situations without causing greater harm or impeding greater goods. Jesus’ associating, even sharing table fellowship, with people who were legally “unclean,” subordinating the requirements of the Sabbath to the needs of suffering people, associating freely with women despite religious and cultural restrictions, and even including women in his ministry, welcoming sinners who were supposed to be ostracized or even executed, maintaining that it was more important to be humbly repentant before God than exact in one’s observance of the Law, and so on were prophetic actions, i.e., actions and attitudes that bore witness to the true nature of God even when that seemed to go against the official religious positions and regulations. I do not think it is an accident that Pope Francis, who is a Religious, is having a good deal of trouble making some of his prophetic judgments and behaviors acceptable to some people who hold office in the Church and who think Francis is confusing people and unsettling their faith. Francis’ vision of the Church as a field hospital for the morally and spiritually as well as physically and culturally wounded, is a prophetic rather than an institutional vision of the Church. But if we look and listen carefully, virtually everything that Francis has said and done which has evoked criticism and even anxiety in high places is an appeal to God’s nature as love, God’s patience, God’s forgiveness of human weakness and even evil. His most shocking words and actions, like those of Jesus in the Gospel, are prophetic and, even though he is pope, when he acts prophetically he runs into opposition in the institution. We can hardly be surprised when we, acting in fidelity to our prophetic vocation in the Church, sometimes run into opposition from the guardians of the Church as institution. But when Francis calls on Religious to “wake up the world,” even to “make a mess” he is calling us to embrace the prophetic character of our life. The prophetic mission is not to keep order, see that everyone keeps the rules. It is to proclaim to the world, including especially to sinners and suffering people, that God is their God, that they are loved, forgiven, sought by the God Jesus called “Abba” and presented as the Father of the prodigal child even though that shocked the obedient and dutiful older brother who, by his own claim, “never broke a law or disobeyed an order.”

Religious Life in the long 400 year period of over institutionalization and Hyper legalism that ran from the Council of Trent to Vatican II has often been alienated from both its mystical heart and its prophetic mission. Religious were often enough functionaries in the Church as institution rather than prophets. The main tenor of Francis’ message to Religious has been that our life is intrinsically prophetic and prophets are not called to keep institutions running
and shore up legal structures. They are called to “wake up the world,” to speak God’s word in season and out of season, to bind up the wounds of the suffering regardless of whether the suffering have been morally impeccable or are “deserving” of help, to speak a word of comfort to the alienated, to break down rather than build up walls of exclusion.

Another effect of the charismatic, i.e., the mystical prophetic, character of Religious Life is that it is by nature a non-hierarchical or egalitarian, that is, a communitarian form of Christian life. Unlike the clergy Religious are not related to each other in patterns of superiority and inferiority within a structure of subordinated offices. This is an important aspect of the witness Religious give in the Church. Jesus never held office in his Jewish religious context. He was not a priest or chief priest, or a Levite, or a scribe or a Pharisee, or even the leader of a local synagogue. He was a layman, but one who, like Religious today, was following a particular kind of vocation to prophetic ministry. He was certainly a leader, but his leadership did not derive from office, but from the quality of his life of prayer and ministry.

And Jesus never permitted his chosen band of disciples to establish any kind of rank or superiority among themselves. Every time they got into discussions about who was first, who was most important, who was in charge, who would have the highest place in Jesus’ kingdom, Jesus reprimanded them and assigned superiority to the lowest, the youngest, the least powerful, the dishonorable. This is the kind of egalitarian community Religious establish among themselves and which they form with the people they serve. This sometimes leaves Religious powerless in ecclesiastical situations of power struggles, as it left Jesus without resources when the political and religious hierarchies went after him. But Religious Life is not part of the hierarchical structure of the Church and that is not only a major feature of the life within Congregations but of its power and influence in ministry.

The recovery of the mystical prophetic identity of Religious life is at the heart of the renewal of Religious Life that has been going on since the Council, and it is responsible not only for a revitalization of the life and a renewal of its forms and functions but also for its struggles within Congregations, with more conservative elements in the laity, and with the Church as institution. It is evident, however, that Pope Francis is strongly underwriting this aspect of Religious Life and encouraging us to boldly define our lives as intrinsically prophetic.

4. The fourth element of this first part of our definition of Religious Life is that it is a gift of the Holy Spirit to the Church for the sake of the world. This is what makes this life charismatic. It is not a human invention but a work, an invention, of the Spirit, just as Jesus’ vocation which he announced and described in the Synagogue in Nazareth as it is recounted in Lk. 4, derived from the Spirit of God who came upon him and sent him to preach good news to the poor. Religious Life does not exist, and individuals are not called to it, primarily for the sake of the individual called, the Congregation he or she enters, or the Church as institution. This life, like the Church itself, exists for the world, to help the Church be what it is called to be, “a Light to the nations”.

The Church did not invent Religious Life and does not own it. And in a very real sense, Religious do not “work for the Church” any more than the Church should work for itself. As Pope Francis has said so many times, when the Church becomes “self referential,” when the Church is about itself, it has lost its way. Jesus was not sent to found an institution. He was sent to give life to the world. And Religious are not called to serve or perpetuate an institution but to preach the Good News to every creature. The Church as institution, our Congregations as institutions, should foster and promote this evangelical mission, but not replace it.

Because the institutional Church can be and often is dysfunctional, self referential, even immoral Religious can be tempted, as were the Old Testament prophets like Jeremiah and even Jesus who wept over the Jerusalem which rejected him, to reject the Church as more
an impediment to than an instrument of God’s word and work. But there are important reasons for Religious to resist this temptation, to maintain their ecclesial identity and role, as it was important for Jesus, like Moses and Jeremiah before him, to remain a faithful Jew to his very last breath. Among these reasons I would single out two that might be especially important today.

First, Religious Life is a visible and public ecclesial entity, but it is not limited to being a representative of the ecclesiastical institution. So, it can be the outreach of the Church as Body of Christ beyond the boundaries of the Church as institution. Many people who find it difficult or impossible to relate to the Church as institution, or who are rejected and condemned by the institution’s laws and representatives, experience the love of God for themselves, and thus the Church as the presence of Christ, through the outreach to them of Religious. This is sometimes dangerous for the Religious, but it is fidelity to Christ.

And secondly, by being in itself a non hierarchical, egalitarian, communal form of Church, Religious Life can bear an especially clear witness to the true nature of the Church as the People of God, as a community of equals, as the Body of Christ in service of the world. It has been often remarked in recent years that Religious have been the carriers of Vatican II, especially of its ecclesiology of the Church as the People of God, to the world. Religious have been signs of credibility, embodiments of the Gospel, for people alienated from the Church or even from religion itself. It is largely because of their identity which is deeply ecclesial but which is not submerged in institutionalism or distorted by relationships of superiority and inferiority that Religious can bear this Good News to the world.

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The mystical prophetic character of Religious Life has, historically, and even today, often been the source of tension between Religious and the officeholders in the institutional Church. Prophecy and institution, in Jesus’ day and in our own, have never been entirely comfortable bedfellows. The prophet draws his or her identity and mission directly from the contemplative union with God which is at the heart of this vocation, not from appointment or delegation by ecclesiastical authorities. Often enough prophetic ministry passes over, under, around, or past the requirements or arrangements of law and institution. This is not because the prophet is a scofflaw or has no respect for authority or institutions. It is because, as we see in the life of the Old Testament prophets and clearly in the life of Jesus, law and institutions sometimes, even often, do not cover all cases, or cannot be applied in some situations without causing greater harm or impeding greater goods. Jesus’ associating, even sharing table fellowship, with people who were legally “unclean,” subordinating the requirements of the Sabbath to the needs of suffering people, associating freely with women despite religious and cultural restrictions, and even including women in his ministry, welcoming sinners who were supposed to be ostracized or even executed, maintaining that it was more important to be humbly repentant before God than exact in one’s observance of the Law, and so on were prophetic actions, i.e., actions and attitudes that bore witness to the true nature of God even when that seemed to go against the official religious positions and regulations. I do not think it is an accident that Pope Francis, who is a Religious, is having a good deal of trouble making some of his prophetic judgments and behaviors acceptable to some people who hold office in the Church and who think Francis is confusing people and unsettling their faith. Francis’ vision of the Church as a field hospital for the morally and spiritually as well as physically and culturally wounded, is a prophetic rather than an institutional vision of the Church. But if we look and listen carefully, virtually everything that Francis has said and done which has evoked criticism and even anxiety in high places is an appeal to God’s nature as love, God’s patience, God’s forgiveness of human weakness and even evil. His most shocking words and actions, like those of Jesus in the Gospel, are prophetic and, even though he is pope, when he acts prophetically he runs into opposition in the institution. We can hardly be surprised when we, acting in fidelity to our prophetic vocation in the Church, sometimes run into opposition from the guardians of the Church as institution. But when Francis calls on Religious to “wake up the world,” even to “make a mess” he is calling us to embrace the prophetic character of our life. The prophetic mission is not to keep order, see that everyone keeps the rules. It is to proclaim to the world, including especially to sinners and suffering people, that God is their God, that they are loved, forgiven, sought by the God Jesus called “Abba” and presented as the Father of the prodigal child even though that shocked the obedient and dutiful older brother who, by his own claim, “never broke a law or disobeyed an order.”

Religious Life in the long 400 year period of over institutionalization and Hyper legalism that ran from the Council of Trent to Vatican II has often been alienated from both its mystical heart and its prophetic mission. Religious were often enough functionaries in the Church as institution rather than prophets. The main tenor of Francis’ message to Religious has been that our life is intrinsically prophetic and prophets are not called to keep institutions running
and shore up legal structures. They are called to “wake up the world,” to speak God’s word in season and out of season, to bind up the wounds of the suffering regardless of whether the suffering have been morally impeccable or are “deserving” of help, to speak a word of comfort to the alienated, to break down rather than build up walls of exclusion.

Another effect of the charismatic, i.e., the mystical prophetic, character of Religious Life is that it is by nature a non-hierarchical or egalitarian, that is, a communitarian form of Christian life. Unlike the clergy Religious are not related to each other in patterns of superiority and inferiority within a structure of subordinated offices. This is an important aspect of the witness Religious give in the Church. Jesus never held office in his Jewish religious context. He was not a priest or chief priest, or a Levite, or a scribe or a Pharisee, or even the leader of a local synagogue. He was a layman, but one who, like Religious today, was following a particular kind of vocation to prophetic ministry. He was certainly a leader, but his leadership did not derive from office, but from the quality of his life of prayer and ministry.

And Jesus never permitted his chosen band of disciples to establish any kind of rank or superiority among themselves. Every time they got into discussions about who was first, who was most important, who was in charge, who would have the highest place in Jesus’ kingdom, Jesus reprimanded them and assigned superiority to the lowest, the youngest, the least powerful, the dishonorable. This is the kind of egalitarian community Religious establish among themselves and which they form with the people they serve. This sometimes leaves Religious powerless in ecclesiastical situations of power struggles, as it left Jesus without resources when the political and religious hierarchies went after him. But Religious Life is not part of the hierarchical structure of the Church and that is not only a major feature of the life within Congregations but of its power and influence in ministry.

The recovery of the mystical prophetic identity of Religious life is at the heart of the renewal of Religious Life that has been going on since the Council, and it is responsible not only for a revitalization of the life and a renewal of its forms and functions but also for its struggles within Congregations, with more conservative elements in the laity, and with the Church as institution. It is evident, however, that Pope Francis is strongly underwriting this aspect of Religious Life and encouraging us to boldly define our lives as intrinsically prophetic.

4. The fourth element of this first part of our definition of Religious Life is that it is a gift of the Holy Spirit to the Church for the sake of the world. This is what makes this life charismatic. It is not a human invention but a work, an invention, of the Spirit, just as Jesus’ vocation which he announced and described in the Synagogue in Nazareth as it is recounted in Lk. 4, derived from the Spirit of God who came upon him and sent him to preach good news to the poor. Religious Life does not exist, and individuals are not called to it, primarily for the sake of the individual called, the Congregation he or she enters, or the Church as institution. This life, like the Church itself, exists for the world, to help the Church be what it is called to be, “a Light to the nations”.

The Church did not invent Religious Life and does not own it. And in a very real sense, Religious do not “work for the Church” any more than the Church should work for itself. As Pope Francis has said so many times, when the Church becomes “self referential,” when the Church is about itself, it has lost its way. Jesus was not sent to found an institution. He was sent to give life to the world. And Religious are not called to serve or perpetuate an institution but to preach the Good News to every creature. The Church as institution, our Congregations as institutions, should foster and promote this evangelical mission, but not replace it.

Because the institutional Church can be and often is dysfunctional, self referential, even immoral Religious can be tempted, as were the Old Testament prophets like Jeremiah and even Jesus who wept over the Jerusalem which rejected him, to reject the Church as more
an impediment to than an instrument of God’s word and work. But there are important reasons for Religious to resist this temptation, to maintain their ecclesial identity and role, as it was important for Jesus, like Moses and Jeremiah before him, to remain a faithful Jew to his very last breath. Among these reasons I would single out two that might be especially important today.

First, Religious Life is a visible and public ecclesial entity, but it is not limited to being a representative of the ecclesiastical institution. So, it can be the outreach of the Church as Body of Christ beyond the boundaries of the Church as institution. Many people who find it difficult or impossible to relate to the Church as institution, or who are rejected and condemned by the institution’s laws and representatives, experience the love of God for themselves, and thus the Church as the presence of Christ, through the outreach to them of Religious. This is sometimes dangerous for the Religious, but it is fidelity to Christ.

And secondly, by being in itself a non hierarchical, egalitarian, communal form of Church, Religious Life can bear an especially clear witness to the true nature of the Church as the People of God, as a community of equals, as the Body of Christ in service of the world. It has been often remarked in recent years that Religious have been the carriers of Vatican II, especially of its ecclesiology of the Church as the People of God, to the world. Religious have been signs of credibility, embodiments of the Gospel, for people alienated from the Church or even from religion itself. It is largely because of their identity which is deeply ecclesial but which is not submerged in institutionalism or distorted by relationships of superiority and inferiority that Religious can bear this Good News to the world.

For further reading or the total conference see:

lnx.pastorelle.org/userfiles/file/2015/Angolo/PhilippinesRLWeek2015rev1-8-15Sandra.pdf