

# ***“Religious Life: Where to from here and for whom?”***

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## ***Introduction***

In *Psalms of a Laywoman*, Edwina Gately speaks of the power of story. She writes

We told stories – That’s all. We sat and listened to each other and heard the journeys of each soul. We sat in silence, entering each one’s pain and sharing each one’s joy. We heard love’s longing and the lonely reaching out for love and affirmation. We heard of dreams shattered and visions fled. Of hopes and laughter turned stale and dark. We felt the pain of isolation and the bitterness of death. But in each brave and lonely story God’s gentle life broke through and we heard music in the darkness and smelled flowers in the void. We felt the budding of creation in the searching of each soul, and discerned the beauty of God’s hand in each muddy, twisted path. And God’s voice sang in each story. God’s life sprang from each death. Our sharing became one story of a simple lonely search for life and hope and oneness in a world that sobs for love. And we knew that in our sharing God’s voice with mighty breath was saying love each other and take each other’s hand. For you are one though many and in each of you I live. So listen to my story and share my pain and death. Oh, listen to my story and rise and live with me.

In many ways, congregational times together are times which provide us with the opportunity about which Gately speaks. In some ways, they become times at which we light the campfire, so to speak, in order to share the story of our mission. We gather around the fire of our common mission to tell our story and to carry the energy of that fire forward in our hearts.

As Religious do this today, however, more and more they are coming to the realisation that the story is changing. Perhaps they feel a little like Sam and Frodo, in *Lord of the Rings*, the tale of that extraordinary storyteller, Tolkein, when Sam and Frodo are talking about all the danger and the trouble they’ve had to go through in their own saga.

“But so our path is laid.” [Says Frodo]

“Yes, that’s so,” said Sam. “And we shouldn’t be here at all, if we’d known more about it before we started. But I suppose it’s often the way. The brave things in the old tales and song, Mr. Frodo: adventures as I used to call them. I used to think that they were things the wonderful folk of the stories went out and looked for, because they wanted them, because they were exciting and life was a bit dull, a kind of sport, as you might say. But that’s not they way of it with the tales that really mattered, or the ones that stay in the mind. . . . I

expect they had lost of chances, like us, of turning back, only they didn't. And if they had, we shouldn't know, because they'd been forgotten. We hear about those as just went on . . . I wonder what sort of tale we've fallen into?"

Religious today are wondering anew about the 'sort of tale they have fallen into.' They are beginning to more fully recognise that the story by which they have lived is changing – and not just by way of adaptation, or even by way of reformation, but much more profoundly by way of metamorphosis.

The recognition that Religious Life is changing is hardly innovative. We have lived with this acknowledgement for forty years. The question is not as to whether Religious Life is changing, but to *what* is it changing. Spurred on by the more recent demands of shifting sociology of Religious Life, Religious have largely been engaged in the struggle of re-definition, attempting to situate themselves anew in the margins between Church and Kingdom.<sup>1</sup>

As valid an exercise as this has been, historical developments now seem more clearly manifest to suggest that a wider vision is required of Religious.

#### *To where: A new age*

We live in a new age of the charismatic impulse of which Religious Life is but a relative expression. It has long been a feature of the Catholic imagination to acknowledge the vitality of the tension between the institutional and the charismatic polarities within ecclesial life. The charismatic life, that unpredictable gift of the Spirit to disclose ever-new possibilities for discipleship appropriate to context, is, I believe, at a new threshold of irruption and this enormous implications for the way in which Religious Life might be understood and practiced in the future.

The charismatic life, present in the Church, since that first Pentecostal experience of the Spirit, has assumed the form of various waves in the history of Christian life. It begins in the domestic church of 2<sup>nd</sup> century Palestine and Rome; it irrupts again in the 4<sup>th</sup> century North African desert through the phenomenon of monasticism; it inbreaks further through the visionary mendicant orders of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, just as it finds expression in evangelically committed responses to the discovery of the new world in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and the social questions of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. From this last irruption of the charismatic life, we witness the plethora of those groups known as the apostolic orders.

Dramatic changes in consciousness throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century augur for a yet further irruption of the charismatic impulse. These changes, socio-historical, philosophical as well as theological, have brought about a new paradigm for Christian holiness. Writers speak of this paradigmatic shift in a number of different ways. Some, like Claudio Leonardi, speak of the movement from monastic holiness to political holiness.<sup>2</sup> Others, like William M. Johnston, speak of the 'democratisation of

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<sup>1</sup> See for example David Ranson, "What is the Gift of Religious to Tomorrow's Church?" *Compass* 29 (Summer 1995), 15-18; David Ranson, "The Dance of the New Millennium: Imagining Religious Life Anew". Unpublished Address to the Brigidine Provincial Assembly, Clayton, Victoria, 9 July, 1999.

<sup>2</sup> Claudio Leonardi, "From 'Monastic' Holiness to 'Political' Holiness." In *Models of Holiness*. Edited by Christian Duquoc and Casiano Floristan. Concilium Series 129. (New York: Seabury Press, 1979), 46-55.

holiness;’ others still, of the ‘secularisation of spirituality.’<sup>3</sup> However the paradigmatic shift might be described, the two tiered system of holiness in which perfection was reserved to an elite who had forsaken the secular in pursuit of the sacred, and which had been the currency of religious commitment since the end of persecution in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, is no longer tenable.

The ‘universal call to holiness,’ proclaimed in chapter five of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Vatican Council’s *Lumen gentium*, in effect, synthesises a development of 150 years standing preceding the Council. As a synthesis, however, even without realising it, this declaration becomes the well-spring of new charismatic consciousness. Hindsight is, even perhaps, beginning to offer a realisation into why, in the Conciliar debate, there was a marked difficulty of where to place Religious in the life of the Church. This difficulty, I suggest, is not simply a theological one, as it may have been perceived at the time of the Council, but one which may well have stemmed, phenomenologically, from the changing nature of the charismatic impulse throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The dissolution of a two-tiered system of holiness has had a number of implications for our spiritual consciousness. It has challenged the nature of separation from the secular as intrinsic to consecration, and it has re-defined the locus of charism. Whereas for earlier irruptions of the charismatic life, including that stage of the flowering of apostolic orders, charism was identified with a state of life, now charism is experienced with a new sense of inclusivity.

Precisely from this perspective, the new ecclesial movements, developing as extensions of Catholic Action in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, demonstrate new possibilities for the charismatic life. I wish to suggest this whatever of the political character of such movements. The new ecclesial movements gather to themselves a variety of states of life: single, celibate, married and clerical. They make the reception of charism available not through the withdrawal from secular affairs but capable of being experienced in the midst of the secular. And they have begun, albeit with some lack of transparency, to re-situate charism not as an end in itself, but firmly at the service of mission in which alone it can find its genuine purpose.<sup>4</sup>

It is my own conviction, that the 20<sup>th</sup> century will be recognised, historically, as that period characterised by the rise of the new ecclesial movements – at the least *by way of intimation*, a new form of the charismatic impulse which overshadows earlier forms.

I say this in full recognition of the highly questionable political character, ecclesiastically, of some of these movements. Yet, this awkwardness – and, even distortion – should not, in itself, blind us to the deeper reality of what is occurring from the widest perspective of history. We live in a new age of the charismatic life.

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<sup>3</sup> See William M. Johnston, “The Spirituality Revolution and the Process of Reconfessionalisation in the West,” *Pacifica* 16 (February 2003), 6. See also William M. Johnston, *Recent Reference Books in Religion* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 131.

<sup>4</sup> In developing this perspective I am indebted, albeit in a critical way, to Antonio Maria Sicari, “Ecclesial Movements: A New Framework for Ancient Charisms” *Communio* 29 (Summer 2002), 286-308.

As I stated above, there has been for some time the acknowledgement that earlier forms of the charismatic life, such as apostolic Religious Life, are being brought into a new stage of development if only because of their shifting sociology. However, it is my own perception, that the future presents with a greater challenge than simply that of re-founding, of searching for new forms of what has been, or even of passing on to an informed laity the originating stories of their common life. Much more profoundly, Religious are being invited to accept the relative nature of their way of life in deference to the larger mystery of the charismatic impulse. They are being invited into a radical participation of the paschal mystery which, to use Johann Metz's words, affirms the principle that 'the art of dying is an element of the charismatic art of living.' We know that past forms of Religious Life must die – the large communities, the institutional ministries – but have we fully accepted that what might rise may not be Religious Life at all?

By this question, paradoxically, I do not accept that Religious Life is dying in that it faces extinction. Religious Life, consecrated celibate women and men, living in community and dedicated to mission, will be an ongoing part of ecclesial life, albeit in the background. Just as in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, the monastic paradigm receded into the background in the face of the mendicant paradigm, so too now Religious Life will recede into the background in the face of the new charismatic paradigm.

My basic points are these: Firstly, the real changes that are occurring are not in the paradigms of Religious Life but in the more basic paradigms of the charismatic life. Secondly, the dying that Religious Life must enter is not the death of extinction but the death of position, and therefore the death of effective power.

As it enters into its own peculiar paschal reality, what role might Religious have in this paradigmatic shift? In the paradigm shift in which we live, as in any situation of paradigmatic change, the tension of memory and imagination assumes vital significance.

The lived memory of the charismatic life held by Religious is not without its vital importance as we, as a Church, face a new future of charismatic expression. Religious perhaps are being invited to see themselves analogous to the character in an Islamic Sufi story related by Joan Chittester. This is the story of an only child of a family of thread makers who was orphaned. Wandering nomad weavers took the boy into their tribe for a while but, for lack of means, eventually had to sell him as an apprentice to a family of shipbuilders. In their situation, the shipbuilders trained him to make masts. The young man liked the work, but years later, while on a business voyage for the mastmakers, this same young man - once an orphaned spinner, once an abandoned weaver and now a satisfied mastmaker - was shipwrecked on a primitive island. In this place the people lived in wait for the fulfilment of a promise that God would some day send a foreigner who would help them save their religious treasures from ruin by the hostile environment. "Are you the one for whom we wait? Are you the one who will save our religious treasure?" they asked. At this very moment the young man understood both his past and his future. He took the memory of his experience as a spinner of thread and made rope; he took the memory of his experience as a weaver and made cloth; he took the memory of his experience as a mastmaker and made long, strong poles. And out of all these memories, he fashioned the vision of a tent which saved the values of that people.

Though I do not believe Religious themselves will be the ones who fashion the new home for the charismatic treasure we hold, their memory will be a vital ingredient in its construction, and therefore an indispensable partner to any new imagination. That memory contains a wisdom, particularly of community and of discernment, which the new imagination ignores at its peril.

As the particular historical expression of the charismatic life it has been, Religious Life also demonstrates, with an active memory, a concern for mission which acts to goad any insular orientation within the new ecclesial movements.

### *Always at the service of Mission*

The consideration of a new story being told in the Spirit calls forth a new humility: a humility about ourselves but also a humility about the very nature of Religious Life. It is the humility eloquently expressed in those oft-quoted words of Oscar Romero:

It helps now and then to step back and take the long view. The Kingdom is not only beyond our efforts, it is beyond our vision. We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction of the magnificent enterprise that is God's work. Nothing we do is complete, which is another way of saying that the Kingdom always lies beyond us. No statement says all that could be said. No prayer fully expresses our faith. No confession brings perfection, no pastoral visit brings wholeness. No program accomplishes the Church's mission. No set of goals and objectives includes everything. This is what we are about. We plant the seeds that one day will grow. We water seeds already planted, knowing that they hold future promise. We lay foundations that will need further development. We produce yeast that produces effects far beyond our capabilities. We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that. This enables us to do something, and to do it very well. It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way, an opportunity for the Lord's grace to enter and do the rest. We may never see the end results. But that is the difference between the master builder and the worker. We are workers, not master builders, ministers not Messiahs.

In fact, the humility into which we are all called as servants of the Kingdom at any time, but particularly poignantly at this one, enables us to affirm the nature of the Mission to which we are committed, whatever the expression of the charismatic impulse by which we live. Religious and new ecclesial movement, alike, are subject to the single over-riding concern for mission, for this is what charism is given. Ministry, too, has no purpose other than to effect Mission.

Neither Religious nor ecclesial movement, of course, have a mission. And never had. Just as the Church has no mission. And never has. For the Mission is of God, and of God alone. In the beginning was the Mission, and the Mission was God. The Mission possesses us. It is the Mission that has brought forth the Church into existence, and it is the Mission towards which the charismatic impulse is singularly oriented.

This, I suggest, would be a frightful possibility if it were not for the unique Christian imagination of God as triune.

Jesus reveals to us a God who is triune, a mystery of persons in relationship. As disciples of Jesus, we worship a God who is Comm-unity. This is a mystery of communion, a circle of life, of understanding and of love. It is a mystery of mutuality, reciprocity and dialogue: a community of persons in which each is defined in, through, with, by, and from 'the other' and therefore where personhood is not defined in terms of 'rationality' but solely in terms of 'relationality' – an insight proffered in ancient times by John Damascene and most recently retrieved by certain quarters of postmodernity.

Such a revolutionary imagination of God is given its most eloquent depiction, I believe, in the classic icon of Andre Rublev in 1425 – a familiar presentation but one which never exhausts the lessons manifested through it. Here the divine mystery is realised as a festive banquet in which there is eternally the exercise of hospitality, as an eternal round dance which longs to sweep all into its rhythm as the 2<sup>nd</sup> century Hippolytus would suggest.

To believe in this mystery is to affirm that at the heart of all creation beats the impulse and the drive towards relationship. To proclaim such divinity is to assert that humanity itself is achieved only within an ever-deepening experience of relationship.

As sacrament of this extraordinary Mystery, ecclesial life can only be characterised by attentive listening to each other and open conversation; in a tension which respects both unity and diversity – never one at the expense of the other; through a variety of charisms which work in collaboration with each other; in a deep concern for inclusiveness and reconciliation. We cannot honour this God and act in ways that are not collaborative, dialogical and inclusive or in ways that are not reconciling, healing and thoroughly relational. To be a Church sacramental of this Mystery means that we both share in and co-operate with God's own dream that the whole of creation be gathered up into this same experience of communion, in which nothing is excluded.

As Moltmann declares, "The Trinity is our social program."<sup>5</sup> It is not an abstract doctrine but a way of living together. We cannot worship this God and act in ways of conquest, domination, and lordship. But neither can this God be revered without becoming deeply sensitive to where and how the pain of exclusion might be being experienced in the world and, consequently, at working to redress the experience of exclusion.

The Trinity – and its strategy-in-action, the Kingdom - thus presents us with the template for all pastoral planning, for all congregational decision making about ministry. It places before us the abiding questions: "Where does the ethic of accumulation, fear, selfishness and judgement work in such a way to exclude, marginalise and isolate?"<sup>6</sup> "How might we respond, as a community, to those places

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<sup>5</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom : The doctrine of God*, translated by Margaret Kohl, (San Francisco: Harper, 1991).

<sup>6</sup> See Hugo Echegaray, *The Practice of Jesus*, translated from the Spanish by Matthew J. O'Connell. (Maryknoll, N.Y./Melbourne, Australia : Orbis Books/Dove Communications, 1984).

in such a way as to transform the experience of exclusion into one of embrace?”<sup>7</sup> These questions will be answered differently according to context which is an ever-changing reality. It is our readiness to discern the changing character of the answer that gives account of our fidelity to the Mission of which we shall always remain in service.

In *Pastores dabo vobis*, John Paul II made it clear that all Christian life takes its identity from this triune mystery (n.12). The pope furthered this affirmation through his consideration of the Trinity as a “community in missionary tension”. The pope understood that the triune life is fundamentally characterised by the tension between ‘communion’ and ‘mission.’ In his earlier encyclical *Christifidelis laici*, John Paul II explored the inter-relationship between ‘communio’ and ‘missio’ with some thoroughness, stating

Communion and mission are profoundly connected with each other, they interpenetrate and mutually imply each other, to the point that communion represents both the source and the fruit of mission: communion gives rise to mission and mission is accomplished in communion (n.32)

Whilst in *Pastores dabo vobis* John Paul II invites priests, in particular, to reflect on their identity in light of this tension, his insights have value for all expressions of ecclesial ministry. Christian ministry can only be imagined from the context of the mystery from which it takes its origin – the Trinity: the Divine Community – in – Missionary tension. The Christian minister is therefore servant and bearer of this tension. Christian ministry is therefore at the service of the creation and the sustaining of a community marked by Trinitarian qualities and at the service of fostering ever widening circles of that community’s relationships. As ministers of the ‘communio’, we are to be agents of participation, collaboration and reconciliation forging a unity in the midst, but not at the expense of, diversity. As ministers of ‘missio’ Christian ministers are to be agents of hospitality, embrace an ex-centricity that in particular address the places of isolation, marginalisation and exclusion as they are experienced in whatever context the Christian discovers themselves to be.

As those stamped with the triune imprint, we cannot rest in the face of exclusion and isolation. We are impelled to redress such experience. However it is expressed, the charismatic impulse finds the test of its authenticity in the way that it reverences and engages the Mission which is our Triune God.

The charismatic impulse creates harbingers of the Mission. Yet, it never possesses the Mission. Subsequently, the same humility that acknowledges the relative character of our way of life, and which retains a mindfulness of the divine project to which all is subservient, is the humility that also is capable of recognising when and where the Mission of God is coming into effect – even beyond the institutional structures of the church, even whilst the church remains the indispensable sacrament of the Mission. This humility is not afraid to identify those voices and initiatives, even non-Christian and non-religious, that are nonetheless transparent of the Divine Mission and to work in partnership with them such that the Mission of God is evermore realised in our midst.

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<sup>7</sup> See Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation*. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996).

## **Conclusion**

I began with a consideration on the importance of story. Throughout this reflection I have been suggesting a new story is being told. Yet, the new story that is being told must be, as every genuinely Christian story must, at the service of telling the story of Triune Life with all its promise. Given the theme of story, perhaps, then, I might finish with a story.

The story reminds me of one of Michael Leunig's cartoons in which his figure sits at a window open to the night sky. Upon his legs and against the windowsill is placed a chessboard. Life, and perhaps Religious life particularly, is often felt like playing a game of chess with eternity. But for the story:

In a crucial game in which he was evenly matched with a Russian player, Frank Marshall found his queen under serious attack. There were several avenues of escape, and since the queen is the most important offensive player, spectators assumed Marshall would observe convention and move his queen to safety. Deep in thought, Marshall used all the time available to him and to consider the board conditions. He picked up his queen – paused – and then placed it down on the most illogical square of all – a square from which the queen could be captured by any one of three hostile pieces.

Marshall had sacrificed his queen – an unthinkable move, to be made only in the most desperate of circumstances. The spectators and Marshall's opponent were dismayed. Then the Russian, and the crowd, realised that Marshall had actually made a brilliant move. It was clear that no matter how the queen was taken, his opponent would soon be in a losing position. Seeing the inevitable defeat, the Russian conceded the game.

When spectators recovered from the shock of Marshall's daring, they showered the chessboard with money. Marshall had achieved victory in a rare and daring fashion – he had won by sacrificing his queen.

The writer, Robert Fulgham, from whom I take this story, drew this lesson from the episode: "To me" he said, "it's not important that he won. Not even important that he actually made the queen-sacrifice move. What counts is that Marshall had suspended standard thinking long enough even to entertain the possibility of such a move. He had looked outside the traditional and orthodox patterns of play and had been willing to consider an imaginative risk on the basis of his judgement. From now on in life," recounted Fulgham, "I often hear myself whispering to myself, 'Time to sacrifice the queen.'"

Fulgham's story suggests that one of the principal spirits we need now is the spirit of imaginative risk. It is the spirit that the scripture writers call *parresia* – courage and innovative boldness, the spirit willing to suspend conventional thinking and to try the previously unimaginable. It is the spirit that looks beyond instinctive reactions, seeks to respond in deepest attentiveness to the *whole* picture, and which thus charts a different way forward, full of risk, full of possibility. But was the mystery of bringing something to birth ever otherwise?

This spirit of *parresia* lay at the heart of Jesus' own ministry. It was the spirit that enabled him to suspend standard patterns of thinking and to dream and announce something new. It was the spirit that lead him to imagine altogether new metaphors for authentic human living. *Parresia* is the spirit which also enables Jesus with the courage to let go, to not need to be in control, to recognise that the dream to which he is committed neither originates in him nor is exhausted by his own efforts. It is the spirit of bold surrender and trust, even in the face of apparent contradiction.

Whether we are republican or otherwise, in the freedom of the Spirit, may we never be afraid to sacrifice the queen – whatever it may be for us.