THAT WAS THEN.....THIS IS NOW

The Past, Present, and Future of Women Religious in the United States

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I want to thank the Center for Spirituality of Saint Mary’s College, the University of Notre Dame, and the Center for History of South Bend who have collaborated to make this celebratory event possible and for inviting me to participate in it. Without doubt, the main event will occur this afternoon when we will have the privilege of viewing the extraordinary historical exhibit, Women & Spirit, a Leadership Conference of Women Religious project, ably led in conception and execution by Sister Helen Garvey, BVM, and her numerous colleagues.

The task I have assigned myself in this lecture is to help prepare you for the exhibit, and I hope for ongoing discussion, by relating the exhibit’s historical presentation of American women Religious from the arrival of the first twelve French Sisters on these shores in 1720 to the complex and ambiguous present situation that has emerged since Vatican II, in order to hazard some suggestions about what the future of American Religious Life could, and I hope will, be. In the interests of full disclosure let me say, I come to praise this life, not to bury it. There are many enthusiastic friends of Sisters who fear that the Religious they love are a vanishing breed, if not an endangered species. And there is a small but vociferous group of gleeful traditionalists who hope that the case of Religious is terminal. I would suggest, without minimizing the very real challenges which we face at this critical juncture in the history of Religious Life, that the notice of our demise is greatly exaggerated.

The Past

Let me begin with some statistical information. I hasten to warn that it is difficult to the point of impossibility to get pinpoint accuracy about numbers, distribution, organization, and activities of women Religious, especially over a 300 year history. It is somewhat like trying to establish exactly how many people have visited shopping malls since World War II. We do, however, have some very
interesting, fairly firm data from a wide variety of sources, scientific, historical, and anecdotal, that can help us sketch the big picture.¹

In 1720 the first 12 Religious arrived in what is now the United States. It took more than a hundred years, till 1830, for that number to grow to about 500 in the country as a whole, the number in one medium-sized Congregation today. But that tiny group had begun to exert a significant influence on this emerging nation. Over the next 70 years that number increased a hundredfold, from 500 in 1830 to nearly 50,000 in 1900. A large proportion of this group were foreign missionaries who came to America from Europe.

The mid-19th to mid-20th century was the period of the great waves of immigrants into America, many arriving from Catholic countries.² Women Religious were the primary agents in keeping these newly arrived Catholics, who found themselves in a militantly anti-Catholic environment, grounded in their faith. Sisters built the Catholic school and hospital systems, provided social services of all kinds for Catholics, and for many if not most Americans, for good or for ill, the were the real public face of Catholicism. They were a, if not the, major factor in the mainstreaming of Catholics in American culture, the accomplishment of which was symbolized by the election of the first Catholic president, John F. Kennedy, in 1960.

The big “surge” in the numbers of American-born women entering Religious Life, a somewhat ambiguous demographic phenomenon that has shaped, or distorted, the imagination of today’s

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²An excellent presentation of the story of immigration into what is now the United States is the course on CDs by R. Scott Appleby. “The Story of the Roman Catholicism in the United States” available from Now You Know Media. In the same series is a very fine course by Margaret Susan Thompson entitled “The History of Women Religious in the United States.”
Catholics about what Religious Life should look like, took place in two and a half decades. Between 1940 and 1965 about forty-five to fifty thousand women entered the convent, roughly the same number in twenty-five years that had entered in the first two centuries. At the height of this surge there were more than 180,000 women Religious in this country, with a median age probably between forty and fifty.

These women, with papal encouragement and their own resourcefulness, were being educated well beyond the level of most American women, and the more than 400 Congregations, both those transplanted from Europe and many natively founded, now owned, administered, and staffed an amazing network of Catholic institutions including over a hundred colleges and universities serving the Catholic population which would soon constitute the largest single denomination in the country.

Today, nearly one in four Americans is Catholic.

The 1960’s was a turbulent and exciting time in both the Church and secular culture. Vatican II, the Civil Rights Movement, the Vietnam War, the third wave of Women’s Liberation, the sexual revolution, to name just the most explosive events and movements, radically altered the cultural and religious landscape. This was the context of the sudden decline in the number of women Religious, from the highpoint in 1965 of more than 180,000 to slightly less than a third of that number today. (Just by way of a concrete example which is, however, quite typical: my own Congregation, founded in 1845 with three Sisters, reached a high of 1,614 members in 1966, and has 410 members today. So, in a little over a hundred years it grew by over 1600 and in the last 45 years has declined by 1204 or three-fourths.) And as the total number declined, virtually all the loss was at the lower end of the age scale as far fewer young women entered and a large number of younger Religious left. The median age of those who stayed, therefore, rose dramatically. Today there are about fifty-nine to sixty thousand women Religious with a median age around seventy in most congregations.

It is estimated that over the nearly three centuries since Religious arrived in this country there have been about 220,000 women who have lived this vocation. This suggests that more than a fourth of all the Religious, originally including a huge number of foreign missionaries, in this nearly 300
year, history are living Religious Life today and the vast majority of these are native born. In fact, there are about ten thousand more women in Religious Life today than there were at any point between 1720 and 1900.

The Present

Despite the very large number of women Religious in the United States, the present situation is alarming to many people, in and outside the life, not so much because of the actual numbers -- 59 to 60,000 is an impressive number -- but because of the precipitous decline in numbers and because of the age distribution of Religious who are primarily 60 to 90 years old. Some people, like the Cardinal who launched the investigation of U.S. women Religious in 2009 and the traditionalists who share his views, believe the decline in numbers is due to the infidelity, or poor “quality of life” of the Sisters. The same logic that concludes that the AIDS epidemic is God’s way of wiping out homosexuality apparently suggests to these people that God is also purging the Church of evil Vatican II nuns!

I want to clear some space for some serious discussion of the situation by pointing out two reasons for dismissing this pseudo-theological nonsense. The first is that the dramatic decline in numbers entering the convent since Vatican II is quite adequately explained by a powerful concatenation of historical and sociological factors in the mid-1960’s to mid-1980’s. The second is that a major theological development in the Council’s teaching not only disinclined many from entering but supported the choice of many younger professed Religious to leave. It is the combination of non-entrance and departures of younger people who were not replacing the elderly who have died during the post-conciliar period that has reduced the total number, and raised the median age in Religious Life today. In other words, the huge and rapid decline would have occurred even if every woman in the convent were a shoo-in candidate for canonization with three miracles on her scorecard at the moment of death.

Some of the factors in the decline of entrants are the following. First, the average size of Catholic families declined precipitously in the second half of the twentieth century supplying far fewer possible candidates. Second, dioceses and parishes, for a variety of reasons, closed many of the
“feeder institutions” of Religious Life, namely Catholic grade and high schools, while civil legislation prevented or wiped out auxiliary funding for many others which were forced to close. Thus, Catholic children and youth, already far fewer in number because of the declining birth rate of Catholic families, had far less contact with Religious during their formative years. Third, Catholic girls, until the late 1950s, were largely limited in their vocational choices to early marriage and a lifetime of child-rearing or Religious Life with its somewhat broader spectrum of educational and professional opportunities. In the second half of the 20th century, many more young women began to attend college and their professional and employment options expanded enormously. These three sociological factors, namely, declining number of girls in Catholic families, less contact with Sisters during their formative years, and expanded vocational options for young women, significantly decreased the numbers of young women entering the convent.

However, these factors were exacerbated by Vatican II’s emphatic teaching on the universal vocation to one and the same holiness of all the members of Christ and the call of all the People of God, in virtue of their baptism and confirmation, to participate in the Church’s mission and ministries. In other words, holiness was no longer reserved to the nuns and one no longer had to be a Religious to exercise all the ministries in the Church open to the non-ordained. Why then should one undertake a life which involved the sacrifice of marriage and family, and especially now that a much larger measure of personal independence and material well-being was available to educated women in the secular sphere?

These theological developments were not only a disincentive for some young women who would likely have entered Religious Life in pre-conciliar times but also a motive for many younger Religious, especially those in their 30s, 40s, and early 50s, to re-evaluate their original decision to become Sisters. Many came to realize that their real motives for entering had been primarily the desire for deeper spirituality and/or access to quasi-official ministries. Since both were possible in a committed secular Christian life, without the obligations of Religious Life, many of these younger Religious chose, rightly, to leave. Most of these Religious had not “lost their vocations” through
infidelity nor were they alienated from their Congregations. They simply realized that, whatever had been the case when they entered, they now were not called to Religious Life which is a distinctive vocation in itself, not the sole path to holiness nor the only path to ministry.

There are, then, on the human level perfectly cogent sociological, cultural, and theological explanations for the decline in numbers and rise in age of Religious in the post-conciliar period. Painful and discouraging as the present situation can appear, the temptation to interpret it through the conviction that God rewards fidelity with worldly success (i.e., numbers, money, admiration by the multitudes, and the approval of authorities, etc.) and, therefore, that the current lack of such success is a sign of divine displeasure with today’s Religious, represents seriously flawed theological reasoning. One is tempted to cite, to those critics of contemporary Religious Life who are shedding crocodile tears over the imminent demise of the lifeform, Jesus’ words to Peter who rejected Jesus’ imminent death as God’s way of saving the world: "Get behind me, Satan! You are a scandal to me; for you are judging not as God does, but as humans do" (see Mt. 16:23). Faith in the Resurrection is precisely hope, in the face of human powerlessness, in God’s power that is made perfect in weakness (see 2 Cor. 12:7-9). The criteria of the validity of the prophetic vocation in the Church and world today are the same we see in the life of Jesus whose popularity among the masses lasted less than a year, who was denied and betrayed by his own, rejected by the religious hierarchy as a blasphemer leading the people astray, and framed and murdered by the civil authorities threatened by his non-worldly Reign. It might be important, also, to recall that the only disciples who were left standing -- at the foot of the Cross and at the tomb on Easter morning -- were the women.

In short, Religious Life is not a for-profit venture whose product needs repackaging or a new advertising campaign because the bottom line is not showing a profit. Religious are not selling anything. And in any case, the Cross is never going to capture much of the market share, even among good people. The real question is, are the people in Religious Life today truly called to that life? Are they living it with integrity and passion? And are they offering it clearly and compellingly to people who are genuinely called to it today, even though, for many reasons, these will probably be fewer than
in times past? These are serious questions worthy of serious study. And the exhibit of the history of Religious Life in this country raises precisely those questions.

So, I would suggest that a cohort of fifty-nine to 60,000 people totally committed to the quest for God and the promotion of Jesus’ Reign in this world is not, on the face of it, an ecclesial disaster, much less a scandal. There are plenty of things to weep over in our Church these days, but women’s Religious Life, I would submit, is not one of them.

However, that being said, we do have to look seriously at the implications of the age structure of the current population in Religious Life. Obviously, since many of the younger cohort from the 1960s and 70s have left and very few, especially young, candidates have entered in the last three decades, the median age could only go up. The fact that Religious are a significantly older group today than they were in the 1960’s is neither debatable nor changeable. The only relevant question, then, is “What are we to make of this?” Are American women Religious a dying breed? Will there soon be, as some have quietly and sadly predicted, no Sisters left? In other words, does the rising age of Religious signal the end of the lifeform?

Interestingly, in the just completed August 2011 LCWR national convention the leaders of women’s Congregations were not discussing the end of Religious Life, how to negotiate the inevitable demise of their communities. Rather, they were occupied in discerning in the present situation the signs of new life and figuring out how to foster them. Is this simply whistling past the graveyard? Was the cynical remark of one dismissive blogger that the LCWR convention looked like a meeting of AARP a pre-emptive obituary framed by an objective observer? Once again, some statistical data might be helpful.

First, the lifespan picture in the U.S. is changing rapidly and dramatically. We Americans remain psychologically a youth-fixated, age-denying culture which spends an obscene amount of time and money on processes and products that promise to keep us all, like the resurrected in the medieval artistic imagination, perpetually thirty years old. However, the fact is that three-fourths of the American population is now over the age of 18, and a fourth over the age of 55 while life expectancy,
which was 49 in 1900 is around 80 today. The median age which was 30 in 1980 is 37 today and rising yearly. (We must keep in mind that we are discussing Religious Life in this country in terms of first world demographics. The situation is very different in much of the developing world.)

Much more significant, I think, than the actual expansion in years of normal life or even the reversal of the age structure of our society from most of us being in the under-18 population at the beginning of the last century to the vast majority of us being over 18 today, is the re-envisioning of the life-cycle pattern by geriatricians, developmental psychologists, and cultural anthropologists and sociologists.

Prior to the work of Erik and Joan Erikson the human life-cycle was understood to include four periods: childhood (birth to 12 or so), adolescence (the teen years), adulthood (21 to 50 or so) -- remember when you could get into the movies as a “senior” at the age of 50? -- and old age (50 or so until death, expected around or before 65). Erikson made finer distinctions, discerning seven, and eventually as he himself aged, eight stages or phases of human development, each of which had specific developmental tasks. The recognition of “middle age” as a distinct phase of adulthood, after the 18-40 period of early adulthood and before the old age period of adulthood which Erikson considered to be anytime after 50, expanded the understanding of adulthood comparable to the way the recognition of “adolescence” as a distinct stage had expanded the notion of childhood.

Today adulthood has been even more dramatically expanded as life expectancy has increased. Adolescence is followed, we are now told, not by maturity but by “emerging adulthood” which lasts into the early 30’s. During this period typical young people put off assuming adult commitments as they prolong their education, travel, add various international and occupational experiences to their resume, experiment with relationships, and float financially, often continuing to live in their parents’ home and be carried by their parents’ insurance.

Early adulthood or “Adulthood I” as some students of the subject call it, then extends from the early 30’s to 55 or so during which time these young adults make serious commitments such as marriage, having children, buying a home, and establishing themselves in a career.
“Adulthood II” begins for most with what used to be called “retirement” at 55 or 60 and runs to 75 or 85 before the onset of old age in the mid-80s or beyond. What the specialists are telling us is that this is usually a period, for healthy people who have been relatively successful in Adulthood I, of financial equilibrium and stable relationships, of vigorous physical, mental, and psychological health and highly-developed skills, of widely expanding interests, of changing and expanding intellectual and/or cultural horizons combined with an interest in making significant contributions to society, and often a time of deepening concern with personal spiritual development.

There is increasing consensus among life cycle specialists that retirement is the worst thing these Adulthood II people can do. Withdrawing into pointless or self-indulgent inactivity which is not genuine leisure but simply bored marking time leads to rapid physical, psychological, and social decline and a sense of worthlessness. Healthy Adulthood II is often a time of change in pace or rhythm or interests as these senior women and men take on serious new projects and roles but it is not a time of stagnation, of sitting in a rocking chair waiting for death. Some of these seniors go back to school to prepare for socially productive second careers, begin mentoring younger colleagues, lead or serve on the boards of philanthropic enterprises, run for office, or begin to write or paint. Many develop serious interests in their own religious and/or spiritual development and in fostering of that of others.

Dr. Mary Catherine Bateson, the renowned social anthropologist, calls Adulthood II the “age of active wisdom.” In other words, life which used to run from birth to major diminishment in the 60’s followed by death, now runs from birth to the late 80’s or beyond. During the period from 50 to 80 (or beyond) people today expect to be basically healthy, self-reliant, fully-functioning participants in their life-world. Social expectations of “acting one’s age” are rapidly disappearing. Whether it is women having children in their late 50s or a major artistic talent emerging at 65 or a 70 year old running marathons or a 75 year old running for political office or an 85 year old finishing a PhD or a supreme

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court judge on the bench in his 90s, the expectation that people are finished with life by their late fifties and should get “out of the road” (as the Aussies say), is no longer prevalent or realistic.

What does this mean for Religious Life in the first world where life expectancy is 30 years longer than it was in 1900 and the health of people in their 70s, 80s and even 90s is that of a 40, 50, or 60 year old at the turn of the last century? Let me suggest first a short list of implications:

--First, it is probably really not desirable that people enter Religious Life before their late 20s or early 30s because they are culturally and psychologically unlikely to be ready for permanent life commitment. They need to finish at least their first post-secondary education, get some serious work experience, and establish some adult relationships beyond the primary family circle. Whatever was the case in 1950, today Religious Life is not for kids. That has major implications for recruitment, vocation work, and formation all of which need to be reconceptualized from the ground up.

--Second, the active phase of Religious Life which used to run from 18-55 or 60 now runs from 30 to 90. The most productive time of that lifespan is likely to be 50 to 75 rather than 35 to 45. And the lay contemporaries of Religious, the majority of Catholics, will be the same age. This means that ministry as well as the spiritual/psychological growth pattern need to be re-examined. Who needs our ministry today? What needs to be done in this social and cultural milieu, in the Church and in the world? Who should be in leadership in our Congregations and how should we prepare them for that role? Do we have to begin thinking about and planning for a “formation for Adulthood II” that would be a standard expectation for Religious who are 55-65 years old and that would normally include not only theological updating and spiritual renewal, personal re-energizing, and re-focusing of interests, but also deep discernment about and preparation for the next stage of ministry?4

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4It is interesting that some renewal programs that originally targeted “mid-life” people between 35 and 45 are now attracting people in their 60s or older. These people are not keeping themselves busy or claiming a “reward for a life well spent” before the end. They are passing from Adulthood I to Adulthood II, preparing for second ministerial careers. The problem is that the programs have not changed to meet the changing clientele.
The Future

Now let us turn to the future of American women’s Religious Life with a focus on ministry. For ministerial (that is, non-monastic) Religious, both as individuals and as communities, ministry has been the area of most profound disruption and disorientation in the post-conciliar period. Some reasons for that will be addressed in a moment. This disruption reverberates in nearly every area of the experience of Religious Life today. It affects community life, congregational finances, visibility in the Church and therefore vocations, and is a major factor in the tensions between Religious and the hierarchy. It may be the area in which the renewal of Religious Life has been most puzzling and even troubling for lay people who were used to seeing Sisters as large groups of women from the same Congregation doing together a single work in a single place and who are now wondering “Where have all the Sisters gone?” Dealing creatively with this issue, ministry in post-conciliar Religious Life, is key to planning for the future.

I am convinced, perhaps wrongly but I hope not, of three theses. 1) There will be Religious in the future. 2) They will be adults primarily in the second half of life, which means right now between 60 and 90 with the backbone group in Adulthood II or their 70s; but hopefully, in the not too distant future, between 40 and 90 with a median age in Adulthood I, the 50s to 60s. 3) Their ministries, while in continuity with the apostolates of the past, will not resemble in any recognizable way the ministries most people alive today associate with the Sisters of their pre-conciliar experience. Let me unpack at very unequal length these three theses.

My first thesis is that, for two reasons at least, there will be Religious in the future. First, Religious Life is the oldest vocational lifeform in the Church, dating back to the first century, preceding both matrimony and ordained ministry as public vocations in the Church. And even in its worst times of internal corruption and external persecution, the Church has never been totally devoid of this lifeform. Indeed, it has at times been the best hope of the Church in crisis. Romantic rhetoric to the contrary notwithstanding, Religious Life is more like a sturdy dandelion than a delicate rosebush in the frequently unkempt garden of the Church.
My second reason for believing that Religious Life is not dying is that if we can reclaim and re-articulate our ministerial identity in contemporary terms, which I believe we are in the process of doing, we will become newly visible in the Church. This will likely attract both increased partnership with laity and perhaps some financial support. As the ministerial dimension of the life becomes more coherent it will attract some serious, spiritually sensitive younger adults who will choose this life, not as a solution to their late adolescent identity anxiety, nor as a ticket to elite status and privilege in the Church or assured peer group solidarity, nor as a haven of absolutism to protect them from the ambiguities of adult responsibility in a frighteningly complex culture. Rather, they will choose it in response to a genuine vocation to seek God to the exclusion of any other primary life commitment and to promote the Reign of God in this world with all the energy of their lives.

No doubt there will be relatively few such people entering. I doubt we will ever again see a surge like that of the post-World War II influx. But, as the first hundred years of Religious Life in country attests, the vitality of Religious Life and its contribution to Church and world is not a function of numbers. We do not need hordes of novices to scrub miles of gleaming corridors in giant motherhouses or armies of young nuns to staff the institutions of a ghetto Church defending itself against the world. And it is certainly not our vocation to supply a huge corps of docile unpaid workers for the hierarchy’s projects. We need some people who will respond to the prophetic vocation to mediate the encounter between contemporary culture and the Word of God, who can inspire and facilitate the engagement of their fellow believers in this task, and who will themselves witness, in life unto death, to the validity and vitality of their distinctive vocation in the Church.

My second thesis is that the median age of Religious will drop by a decade or more as more Religious reach higher life expectancy levels in good health and some younger people enter. But I suspect the lifeform will remain, from now on, an adult vocation with the spread being basically throughout Adulthood I and Adulthood II. Emerging adults are not ready for this life and real old age will tend, the specialists are telling us, to be a very short period at the end of an active adulthood rather than the protracted decline into debilitating fragility that it often is today.
My third thesis and main concern is that we seem to have reached the point at which Religious are ready to appropriate our post-conciliar experience and articulate a new model of ministry which I have called, for lack of a better term at the moment, Sisters Ministries. Most of what I will describe and espouse here is already underway in American Religious Life and has been for a couple decades. But we need to see it more clearly in its wholeness in order to make the decisions necessary to stabilize and promote it.

The only ministerial model for women Religious that most people in the contemporary American Church, including Religious themselves, have ever known is the kind we will see illustrated marvelously in the mid-nineteenth to mid-twentieth century sections of the exhibit this afternoon. And that period gave us a glorious, inspiring, and astoundingly productive model of large contingents of Sisters engaged in hierarchically governed ecclesiastical apostolates in Catholic institutions such as schools, hospitals, and social service agencies. But this model fit its time, not ours. That was then, but this is now. Interestingly enough, I think what is emerging today resembles more the first century of our history, between 1720 and 1830, when a few hundred Religious in small, widely dispersed groups were doing whatever needed doing for whomever needed it, and with whoever wanted to help than it does the institutional boom period from which we have recently emerged. I will talk about two aspects of the emerging model: its basis in the reconfiguration of Religious Congregations and the changed focus and characteristics of the new model.

A. The Reconfiguration of Religious Congregations

The energy of American Religious Life in its second period, the mid-nineteenth to mid-twentieth centuries, expressed itself in the founding of hundreds of new communities, many extremely similar to each other in charism, spirituality, and even in apostolic activity but each arising at a different moment, responding in a different locale, or to a different clientele, or to a distinctive need. Each new Congregation rapidly attracted (for reasons we have already considered) large numbers of very young recruits, built its usually impressive facilities, was able to staff its apostolic works without help from other Religious or the laity, and became somewhat hermetically sealed not only from the
secular world including the Catholic laity but even from other Religious Congregations. (What had Dominicans to do with Mercies?)

For a couple decades now we have seen some tentative but increasingly confident initiatives of “reconfiguring” or “merging” of some communities or Congregations. At first these initiatives were a strategy for survival when one or more of the groups was too small, elderly, or poor to survive alone. But this process is now increasingly widespread, involving more communities and/or Congregations in the mergers, and it is less a function of necessity and increasingly one of visionary choice.

Religious are realizing that there is not only strength in numbers but that putting strengths in common, even when survival is not an issue, can have major advantages. Communities which have lived a common charismatic identity in diverse ways, e.g., different communities of Sisters of Mercy, St. Joseph Sisters, Dominicans, or Franciscans, as well as Congregations with compatible, even if not identical, charisms and spiritualities, are experiencing a new energy in unification which allows them to realize economies of scale, both quantitative and qualitative, in several areas.

The pioneers in this process have accrued some valuable experience that can be shared as other communities undertake this journey of renewal through reconfiguration. We may, in the not too distant future, have far fewer small Congregations composed of a hundred or fewer members, and a much smaller number of larger Congregations, each having several hundred members, adequate shared facilities which will allow for the conversion or sale of half empty or unused ones, a leaner and more effective leadership structure, less burdensome ways of caring for the elderly and infirm, more creative formation programs, more flexibility in ministerial discernment, and a sense of corporate resilience from increase in personnel and material resources.

In a very real sense, this process is one not just of reconfiguring, like moving some furniture around or knocking out a wall of the same old house. It is a genuine organic re-founding, but not -- as some of the more extremist reformers of the last few years have suggested -- by jettisoning the constitutive coordinates of Religious Life itself such as perpetual commitment through profession of the vows, or suppressing the charismatic genius of the particular groups that are coming together, but
by re-appropriating the fundamental charism of Religious Life itself through the sharing of the particular charisms of various Religious families.

This process is also already encouraging the important trend of Religious toward sharing ministries across congregational lines. (I note, by way of example, that this lecture is sponsored by the Center for Spirituality of a Holy Cross Sisters’ college. The Center was founded by a lay male faculty member trained in the Carmelite tradition of spirituality and his current successor is a Presentation Sister.) These inter-congregational ministerial ventures, like some charter schools, artist collectives, or spirituality centers, in which one or two members of two or more Congregations form the core of a ministerial endeavor which then gathers and animates a wider circle of lay partners who might be associates, affiliates, oblates, or simply volunteers. Perhaps the longest operating and best example of such a Sisters Ministry is Network, the Washington, D.C. based social justice lobby founded 40 years ago by 47 women Religious from diverse Congregations and which continues to involve individual Sisters, Congregations, and lay colleagues in such projects as the recent passage of the Health Care Reform bill.

B. The Changing Focus and Characteristics of Sisters Ministries

Many Congregations have become convinced that, even if the necessary resources were available to revive the institutional apostolates of the pre-conciliar century, especially those directed primarily to the needs of people at the two ends of the life-cycle, children and the sick and dying, these ministries may not be where Religious are most needed today. Consequently, they have allowed and even encouraged their members to move into new ministries even as their Congregations have struggled with the problematic effects of this individualization of ministries on local community life, congregational identity and solidarity, visibility in the Church, vocations, financial stability, and especially the ability of the Congregation to protect its members from ecclesiastical exploitation and abuse.

But in the process of this courageous but costly experimentation in ministry Religious have learned a lot which, I would suggest, it is time to articulate, appropriate, and promote. Or as some
would say more pithily, we need to name, claim, and aim what has been developing in our post-conciliar ministerial experience. To whom is our ministry today preferentially directed and what are the emerging and distinctive characteristics of that ministry?

1. To Whom and Where

For a complex combination of reasons women Religious found themselves increasingly ministerially “placeless” in the post-conciliar Church. The Council powerfully articulated and emphasized the dignity and mission of the laity, the central importance of the local Church understood as diocese, parish, and even family as the center of Christian life, and the solidarity of the ordained, that is, bishop, deacons, and presbyters in service of this local Church. This renewed ecclesiology had little or no recognized place for ministers or ministries that were not part of this hierarchically organized structure of lay and ordained. And the Council several times insisted, correctly, that Religious are not a third category in the Church located somewhere between the laity and the ordained. But, whatever the theological correctness of this position, Religious were not, in their own experience or the experience of anyone else in the Church, simply laity. If anything, they tended to be, wrongly but really, assimilated to the clergy which, fortunately in my opinion, they are not.

Compounding this “placelessness” and consequent invisibility of Religious within the new theology of ministry was the rapid physical disappearance of many of the institutions, such as Catholic schools, which were the privileged locations of the distinctive ministry of Religious, and/or the disappearance of the Religious themselves from those institutions because of declining financial and personnel resources.

While a fairly large number of women Religious, especially at first, relocated into parochial and diocesan ministries their place in the ecclesiastical configuration was and is anomalous and often has been fraught with tension. The individual Religious was impotent in a clerical power structure. Religious were often used or abused until they resigned or were fired. (Women Religious probably hold some kind of record for most people who have been fired because they were competent!) Even Religious appointed to head parishes in clergy-strapped dioceses knew that they were stand-ins who
were helping the diocese to disguise and to deny the implications of the clergy shortage but who could and probably would be removed instantly if a priest of any caliber became available. As they led “substitutes” for Eucharist, or scrambled to find clerics for “real” sacraments after they had done all the pastoral preparation of the candidates, they and the people were constantly reminded that their stop-gap ministry, no matter how substantively authentic, in the eyes of the official Church was defective at best and empty at worst. Of course, some parochial situations were and are genuinely life-giving for Religious and the people they serve, but such situations work only if and to the extent that the clergy choose to make it work. And the healthiest parochial situation is always only one clergy reassignment from disaster.

In other words, the demise of most distinctively Religious institutional ministries, i.e., those founded, headed, and/or mainly staffed by Religious Congregations, and the relocation of most pastoral ministry into the parochial setting left Religious not just economically jobless but ministerially “homeless.” Women Religious are not clerics nor are they lay ecclesiastical ministers. They are something for which the Church as ecclesiastical ministerial structure has, historically, no category, namely, ecclesial ministers who are not ordained and women Religious who are not cloistered.

But, increasingly, ministerial Religious themselves have realized that they are not, and do not want to be again, what, in fact, they had gradually become in the period of their greatest growth, namely, a clerically domesticated institutional job corps working for the hierarchy. Religious, by Profession, derive their primary ecclesial community identity from their Congregation, not from the parish. They minister out of the charism of their Congregation, according to its Constitutions, and under the leadership of its elected officers. They do not work for the parish and Congregations of pontifical right do not work for the diocese. The Church as institution did not create Religious Life nor establish its charismatic identity and it does not support Religious Congregations financially or otherwise. In other words, Religious as Religious do not “work for” the Church as institution. They minister as a particular lifeform in the ecclesial Body of Christ to the Church as the People of God.
As this has become clearer to Religious themselves, they have progressively called upon their professional preparation and experience, which is extensive in most cases, to establish themselves in a wide variety of situations in dire need of ministerial presence and action but which are not parochial or diocesan and in which official ecclesiastical personnel usually do not minister. At first this was a very *ad hoc* development. Sisters moved into all kinds of individual ministries, some connected to traditional ministries of their Congregation and some with no such connection; some expressly religious and many not; some explicitly Catholic but many not exclusively so; some approved by the hierarchy and/or somehow related to the official structures of the local Church but some without such connections or actually reaching out to people who are magistrateship by or alienated from the institutional Church.

The variety of ministries into which Religious have found their way is as astonishing as the variety of ministries undertaken by Sisters in the earliest period of their presence in this country. However, I think this variety is tending to organize itself loosely into four clusters, in each of which there may be as many different specific ministries as there are Sisters involved. And Sisters primarily located in one cluster may well function in other clusters as well. In other words, distinguishing these clusters is descriptive and hermeneutical rather than prescriptive or normative in any sense. Someone else might categorize them very differently or see no need to categorize them at all. But I think as I briefly describe these clusters most Religious will recognize their Congregations’ recent and current experience and laity might be able to realize “where all the Sisters have gone.”

Social justice ministries is one such cluster. Its theological “glue” tends to be Catholic Social Teaching and its primary focus is on systemic or structural change toward justice. It embraces peace activism, immigration work, advocacy for the oppressed, NGO involvement and political lobbying, environmental and ecological work, liberationist ministries, and others. Ministers located primarily in this cluster include social scientists, activists, lawyers, political and community organizers, economists and sociologists, urban farmers and educators, and many hands-on practitioners trying to build and run the intermediate agencies meeting all kinds of day to day needs of those whose problems are the bitter
fruit of a structurally unjust society that functions primarily for those who have at the expense of those who do not.

Ministers working directly with the victims of social injustice, natural disasters, or misfortune of any kind form a second cluster. Its theological/spiritual “glue” is deep compassion for the suffering Body of Christ and its primary focus is on his individual members in all the particularity of their daily lives. Many Religious have retrained in Clinical Pastoral Education, social work, psychological counseling, public health, or medical professions so that they can minister as chaplains, social workers, or counselors in hospitals, clinics for the poor, prisons and juvenile detention centers, or wherever suffering people need both professional and spiritual care. Some are teachers in religious or public schools at all levels, tutors in literacy and language programs, or interpreters for those unable to speak for themselves. Some are providers of child-care, home-care, and elder services. They might be managers of low-income housing facilities or exercise a ministry of presence in places where the elderly, the lonely, society’s outcasts, and the magistrateship live or gather. They can be found working in homeless shelters or with addicts, with victims of torture or sex trafficking. And some of them are in cross-cultural ministries in developing countries whose soil has already drunk the blood of Religious who are guilty of solidarity with the expendable oppressed. Like many of the sixteenth and seventeenth century founders of the first non-cloistered Congregations of women Religious and those earliest Religious missionaries to this country, these Sisters are the “first responders” to the most pressing needs in our society.

A third cluster of ministries of contemporary Religious includes intellectuals, scholars, and artists. The theological “glue” of this group is faith seeking to understand, unfold, and express the Gospel in the language of our time. Its focus is the reflection without which, as Scripture says, the earth becomes desolate (cf. Jer. 12:11). They are involved in all the activities by which the mystery of God incarnate in Jesus is opened up for the contemplation, nourishment, and spiritual empowerment of the people of our time. These ministers are convinced that until we understand what is going on in our world there is little chance of changing it. For them, experientially, the greatest impediment to the
coming of the Reign of God is darkness in all its forms: ignorance, ugliness, lack of vision, hopelessness. In this group are the Religious involved in theological, philosophical, humanistic, and scientific research, writing, and teaching; in the arts as composers and performers and critics; in publication and journalism and electronic networking. They are engaging the questions of meaning, exploring the dangers, possibilities, and challenges of postmodernity, of inter-religious dialogue, of globalization, of environmental degradation, of technology, of contemporary science. They are, in the Church and for the world, what Etty Hillesum called the “thinking heart.” Their passion is to help people see so that they can become, choose, and act according to the pattern of the Word made Flesh so that that Word may be ever more fully the Light of the World.

And finally, a fourth cluster of ever more urgently needed ministries, is concerned with the thirst for meaning and transcendence of so many people in our world whose urgent personal quest for psychological and spiritual growth and wholeness, for centeredness in a fragmented world, often finds little or no spiritual nourishment in institutional religion of any stripe. Others are regular practitioners in their parishes but feel a deep need for more. The theological “glue” of this cluster is of ministries is their focus on the growth in the Spirit of individuals and groups. Here we find those who staff spirituality centers, who direct retreats, who do spiritual direction. Others are in campus ministry or other projects serving emerging adults trying to situate themselves in a world that can tell them how to do almost everything but not why to do anything. Some Religious are leading groups of lay people in reading, reflection, study, discussion, prayer. Some of these ministers are therapists putting various types of holistic healing in the service of people’s spiritual and psychological growth. Some are on the popular lecture and workshop circuit, or are writing in the area of spirituality and theology for the non-specialist. The focus of these ministries, whatever their form, is the direct fostering of personal spiritual growth among Catholic believers as well as among those who belong to other denominations, other faith traditions, or none.

But these extremely diverse ministerial enterprises, in all of these areas, are not just “baptized” secular jobs or professions turned into “ministry” by the pious intention of the worker. Religious are in
all these spheres precisely as the presence of Christ acting salvifically in the world that God so loved (see Jn. 3:19) and into which Jesus sent his disciples to preach the Gospel to every creature (see Mk. 16:15), in season and out of season as Paul urged Timothy (see 2 Tim. 4:1-2). Francis of Assisi told his followers to preach the Gospel at all times, using words when necessary. Today we might interpret this to mean, preaching explicitly when that is possible and effective and implicitly when it is not. But in every ministry in which they are engaged, Religious are Church, the Body of Christ, reaching out to the whole world not as agents of the institutional Church, not to proselytize or convert, much less to promulgate or enforce Church law or discipline. They are present first of all to witness by their lives of service to the primacy of God, to the loving fidelity of God. They come make believing possible by how they live the discipleship they offer but do not impose. They come, in other words, sent by their Religious Congregations, to bring the love and justice of Jesus into every corner of human experience regardless of the explicitly religious commitments or lack thereof of the people to whom they minister.

2. Characteristics of this New Model of Ministry

As Religious have felt their way forward in this unfamiliar ministerial terrain certain features or characteristics have begun to appear more clearly. Articulating just three of these, and there are others, will illustrate, on the one hand, how different today’s ministerial picture is from that of the pre-conciliar century and, on the other hand, the real continuity between what has been developing among women Religious since the Council and what the earliest founders of non-cloistered ministerial Religious Life envisioned.

Perhaps the most striking feature is the individualization of ministries in contrast to the collectivism and uniformity of pre-conciliar apostolates. When the vast majority of candidates entered Religious Life directly out of high school, without any professional training or experience and often little idea what they would do if given a choice, it was natural enough to prescribe basically the same education for all since they would all go into the Congregation’s institutional apostolates.

Candidates today enter with at least a college education and often already launched in specialized professions. And even those not yet deeply involved in a particular profession usually have
developed interests which might be quite diverse. Not homogenizing the ministerial preparation or assignment of its members has meant that Congregations are no longer exclusively or even primarily providers of staff for Catholic institutions. In other words, the individualization is partly a function of professional specialization on the part of the members. But it is also a recognition by the Congregation that running ecclesiastical institutions is not necessarily what it is called to here and now. Furthermore, experience shows that people are both better human beings and more effective ministers when they are utilizing their talents and training in relation to what really needs to be done.

At first, the dismantling of a uniform and collective apostolate was experienced as a loss of corporate identity. Because Sisters were not all doing the same thing they seemed to have less in common. Only a few were engaged in the Congregation’s traditional work and the rest seemed to be isolated planets hovering in outer space as everyone tried to find a way to explain the situation as something other than fragmentation, loss of focus, or expediency.

But increasingly Congregations are discovering that uniformity is not the only, or even the best, kind of social glue nor large homogeneous groups the only meaning of community. Diversity can generate another, more organic, but more challenging kind of unity. It is a serious challenge to promote community identity, *esprit de corps*, shared purpose and responsibility, and mutual support -- in other words, real community -- when people are not all living under the same roof and doing the same thing. But many Congregations have realized that while they may no longer be an army on the march it can be just as exciting to be a body of many members. Individualization of ministries need not lead to individualism of members. But, no matter how great the challenge of being and living genuine community in diversity of ministry, many, if not most, Religious today are convinced that the availability and location of brick and mortar convents cannot be allowed to determine ministerial commitment. Responding to the needs of the People of God determines where and how we live. Just as the first Sisters in this country left large, well-established monasteries in Europe for log cabins and borrowed rooms in the wilderness of a strange land, so today’s Religious have gradually clarified their
ministerial priorities. First, the preaching of the Gospel where it is most needed. Then, everything else.

Achieving corporate unity, the unity of a living body, rather than collective uniformity, is also part of the task of re-emerging into visibility in the contemporary situation. Visibility is intrinsic to the public witness which, as the Council said, is an important function of Religious Life in the Church. It is also important for attracting new members. The diversity of talents, training, interests, professions, and ministerial focus of members makes us less a work force of interchangeable parts and more a mobile, flexible team of ministers able to address a variety of needs. But how to be corporately and personally visible in a variety of non-ostentatious ways rather than through identical or even bizarre clothing or common dwelling or uniform work is a challenge we are still trying to meet. As the response of the Catholic laity to the recent Vatican investigation of American ministerial Religious surprisingly demonstrated, we may be much more visible in the Church and society than we thought we were. And the “Women and Spirit” exhibit is fostering that visibility. But this is an ongoing challenge.

A second important difference between today’s Religious ministry and its predecessors is not only who Religious minister to but who Religious minister with. In pre-conciliar times Religious tended to see any incorporation of laity into “our” ministry as, at best, a necessary evil. Lay professionals were hired only when no Sister was available and they were never really considered equal partners in ministry even if they were professionally superior to their Religious colleagues. If Religious saw themselves as allied with anyone outside the Congregation it was with the clergy.

This has changed dramatically in the past couple decades. Not only have lay women, and even some men, sought to affiliate formally in various ways with Religious Congregations, giving rise to the Associate Movement and its analogues, but Religious increasingly minister more with laity than with clergy. Furthermore, in many Congregations lay people are ministering to and not simply with the Religious. They are infirmary staff and administrators, hold leadership positions in the Congregation’s financial structure, and coordinate facilities and personnel. This increased partnership of Religious
with laity, both with Associates and other fellow ministers, is a very healthy development, not only because it greatly enhances their common ministry but because it properly situates Religious and other laity in relation to each other in the Church. It also emphasizes the essentially non-clerical character of Religious and of their ministries.

Finally, certain qualitative characteristics that are theologically and functionally significant have emerged much more clearly in the last decade or so. First, the ministries of Religious are deeply ecclesial, that is, rooted in the sacraments of initiation and specified by the charism of their Congregation. But their ministries are often not ecclesiastical in the sense of being part of or subject to the clerical structure of ordained ministry. Cooperation and coordination between ordained ministry and that of Religious will always be necessary when both minister in the same arena and/or to the same clientele but today the basis from which Religious relate to the hierarchy is considerably less confused than it was in the past when all public ministry in the Church was subsumed without remainder under a monolithic hierarchical authority. Religious are not mini- or “wannabe”-clerics and their ministries have their own integrity and legitimate autonomy. The Church is richer for this diversity and a wider range of people can be served from this variety of ministerial “platforms.”

Second, Religious are becoming more confident in claiming the charismatic, and specifically prophetic, character of their vocation rooted in Religious Profession and the charism of their Congregation. Their ministries, while they may be and usually are institutionalized to some extent for the purpose of continuity and efficiency, are not institutional in the sense of building, serving, or being constrained within ecclesiastical establishments. Religious orders are not “founded to” staff schools or run hospitals. Flexibility in choice and change of ministries is not infidelity to their founding charism. Ministerial flexibility and mobility is part of the charism of Religious Life as prophetic lifeform.

Third, a much more potentially conflictual characteristic is the effect of the increasingly feminist consciousness of women Religious on their approach to ministry. It is, I think, accurate to say that the majority of Religious in renewed Congregations, as individuals and as communities, influenced as much or more by the Gospel and the spirit of Vatican II as by secular feminism, espouse
an egalitarian and collegial approach to life and ministry. This often contrasts sharply with the pervasively patriarchal sensibility of the institutional Church which is hierarchical rather than egalitarian in its self-understanding and relationships and pyramidal rather than collegial in operation. In ministry Christian feminists espouse an ideal of inclusivity, seeking to empower all participants through a sharing of responsibility and authority, in contrast to the tendency to mark off, enhance, centralize, and protect clerical power through exclusion and dependency.

It is unrealistic to deny that this constitutes a significant difference in approach to ministry between the institutional Church and many of its agents on the one hand, and the majority of Religious Congregations and their members on the other. This does not necessarily mean that irresolvable or incessant conflict is inevitable or that strenuous efforts to work together effectively should be abandoned. But it does mean that, as in the time of the prophets in ancient Israel and the prophet Jesus in relation to the institutional Judaism of his time, so today Religious can expect ongoing tension with the hierarchy. Accepting this always painful dissonance, rather than denying it, feeling guilty about it, or trying to placate those who reject feminism in theory and practice, is part of the new ministerial model that is emerging in Religious Life.

In short, I am proposing that women’s ministerial Religious Life has a future in this time and beyond. We will not look today or in the future as we looked in the past -- either in outer appearance, or in age, or in numbers, or in lifestyle, or in ministry. But we will be what we have been since the first century, disciples personally called by Christ to commit ourselves totally to him to the exclusion of any other primary life commitment, and out of that lifelong relationship to participate without reserve in his mission from the One who so loved the world as to give the only Son so that all might not perish but might have eternal life.

Conclusion

Seeing the “Women & Spirit” exhibit this afternoon will, I think, be a mind-blowing experience as it helps us grasp the stunning contribution of women Religious, by who they have been and what they have done, in and for the American Church over the past 300 years. But I hope it will have the
effect on you that my first viewing of it had on me. It is not just an occasion for button-bursting pride in our history and certainly not for complacency in the sense that we have done our part and it is someone else’s turn as we slip quietly out of the picture. Nor should it be a nostalgia-trip down memory lane as we sigh for the “good old days” when we were the most recognizable, numerous, and perhaps admired public agents in the American Church and the envy of many in the “old world.” Rather, I hope it will make our hearts burn within us as our past rises up before our contemporary eyes and turns them toward the future. I hope we will find ourselves saying, “If that was then, what must we be and do now to be worthy of such a legacy?”