

Candlemas for Consecrated Life?

I asked James what he would like me to talk about and he replied: ‘Really, the subject can be up to you. An area that we are all looking at is diminishment and visioning for the future.’ Well that was a massive hint, so I will try to say something about that. How we keep alive our hope for religious life when vocations are few and it looks as if the glory days are over?

I believe it is Candlemas for consecrated life. Candlemas is half way between the shortest day of the year and the spring equinox. The winter is beginning to lessen its grip, but there is not much sign of the spring. The seed is germinating in the soil but is as yet hardly visible. In the Middle Ages, Germans and Scandinavians celebrated that bears were waking up after a good hibernation, stretching their paws and wondering what was for breakfast. In America it is ground hog day.

For Catholics, it is the feast of the presentation of Jesus in the Temple. Simeon and Anna represent the Old Testament that is ceding its place to the New. The new epoch is barely visible, Just a small baby like any other coming to be presented to the Lord. We light our candles in the dark as a sign that we are confident that spring is on the way.

I think that’s situation of religious life in Britain. There are small signs that something is stirring in the soil. The lowest point for the entrance of women to religious life in England and Wales was 2004, when there were just 7. In 2014, this had risen to 45¹. A survey revealed that a surprising 8% of American millennial Catholic women had considered a vocation, at least ‘a little seriously.’ Sister Nathalie Becquart reports an increase of interest in the religious life among the millennial generation in France. She said: ‘Without doubt we are entering today into the era of post-secularisation and the youngest are the first actors and carrier of a new spiritual thirst and a new vision of religious life.’ The Dutch Province of the Dominican friars had seemed to be teetering towards extinction, but now there is a small but steady stream of young people entering the noviciate.

These are all small candles in the dark. So how are we to live this Candlemas, if that is indeed what it is? Simeon and Anna, Mary and Joseph each witness in their own ways to the tiny flame of the light to the Gentiles. Perhaps they can give us a few hints.

Simeon and Anna

Simeon and Anna have the courage to face the passing of their time. Simeon can now die.

¹ The National Office for Vocations, for the Roman Catholic Church in England and Wales.

Master, now you are dismissing your servant^[h] in peace,

according to your word;

³⁰ for my eyes have seen your salvation.

Many of our congregations are going to die, at least in this country. And each of us individually will do so at some time. In my experience, the best preaching of the gospel by the brethren is often in how they die. With some maybe the only good sermon they ever manage! When I was elected Provincial back in 1988, I visited the last Dominican monastery of contemplative nuns in Britain, at Carisbrooke on the Isle of Wight. I went with the previous Provincial, Peter Edgar. There were just four nuns left, three of them very ancient. One of them said to us, 'But our dear Lord would not let Carisbrooke die, would he?' To which Peter replied immediately, 'He let his son die.'

Survival is not a typically Christian value. Jesus did not say 'I have come that you may survive and survive abundantly.' The story of our faith is about death and resurrection, not survival. A moment will come to all of our congregations, as it did to Simeon and Anna, when we must accept our demise, even the Dominicans. Well, as long as we can outlast the Jesuits! Many congregations have faithfully lived their charism and have fulfilled their vocation. They can go in peace.

I have seen monasteries, for example in Spain, shipping in recruits especially from India and the Philippines, just so that they can stagger on a little longer and have people to look after them when they grow old. Of course, there may be surprises ahead. Ancient Elizabeth unexpectedly became pregnant. It might be difficult to discern whether you are like Elizabeth or Anna.

Anna above all witnesses to the beauty of a way of life: 'She was of a great age, having lived with her husband seven years after her marriage,³⁷ then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped there with fasting and prayer night and day.³⁸ At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.'

Whether our congregation will every have another vocation or not, like Anna, we can all bear witness to the joy of this wonderful way of living. The Rule of St Benedict asks: 'Is there anyone here who yearns for life and desires to see good days?²' The millennial generation

² Rule of St Benedict, RB Pro. 15

seek communities which are alive. A song by John Denver captures this: ‘I want to live, I want to grow, I want to see, I want to know, I want to share what I can give, I want to be, I want to live.’ Intense experiences shared on Twitter or Facebook, Snapchat or Instagram are signs of an exciting life. Something is happening and I am there!

When I went to visit our noviciate in 1965, I was struck by the way that the brethren seemed to be alive. I arrived at the nearest station smartly dressed, you may be surprised to know, more *Downton Abbey* than *Coronation Street*. I was met at the station by two people dressed in shabby duffle coats who whisked me off to the pub. They seemed free and at ease. They were alive and so I could imagine a life with them.

Simeon and Anna await the coming of the Messiah with joyful anticipation. My original interest in religious life was ignited by the joy of a Benedictine great uncle. In a delightful collection of interviews with the heads of religious orders, joy constantly reoccurs as the keynote of the religious life. Don Ángel Fernández Artime, of the Salesians, puts it at its simplest: ‘joy speaks...joy is the most beautiful sign of the consecrated life³.’ Antoine Kerhuel, representing the Jesuits, said, ‘I did not choose the religious life because it was easy or difficult. As far as I know, every form of life has both aspects. My criterion for my choice was the joy.⁴’ If we are to keep the tiny flame of religious life flickering in the dark, then we must care for the joy of our brothers and sisters. If they are struggling, do we ask why, or leave them to stew in their misery? Are we held back by a stifling British reticence?

I am convinced that this joy is rooted in an explicit delight in our vows. The first World Congress on Religious Life, held in Rome in November 2004, was attended by the leaders of over 800 religious institutes and theologians. Mary Johnson and her co-authors, in a book about the future of religious life in the States, point out that in the published summary there is almost no reference to the vows. ‘Chastity (consecrated celibacy) is mentioned simply as one of the convictions for a new praxis, not as a vow; poverty is mentioned only in parentheses; and the vow of obedience is not mentioned at all.⁵’ This also struck me at the time, since my lecture to the Congress was explicitly devoted reclaiming the vows as life giving and no one seemed to take any notice. Not for the first time! You probably will not take any notice either!

³ Benotti p.141

⁴ Benotti p.107

⁵ Mary Johnson, Patricia Wittberg and Mary Gautier, *New Generations of Catholic Sisters: The Challenge of Diversity* Oxford University Press, Oxford, p.53

I am convinced that the future of religious life will be founded on the explicit conviction that our vows are liberating and life-giving. Chastity liberates us to love, obedience to give ourselves without reserve, and poverty frees from all that might weigh us down.

One of the ways to claim and cherish this vowed life is for religious congregations of men to avoid clericalism. Pope Francis has inveighed against the poison of clericalism, whereby ordained priests found their identity on membership of a small, closed group, seen as superior to the unordained people of God. I believe that for religious men, clericalism can stifle our identity as those who have made our vows. Of course most male religious are ordained, and this is a gift to the Church, but most especially if we have a fraternal way of living our priesthood. This is why successive General Chapters of my Order have ordained that the proper way for us to address each other formally is as ‘Brother’, not ‘Father.’ We are friars, which is so say ‘brothers.’

Mutuae Relationes, published in 1978, gave directives for the mutual relations between bishops and religious in the Church. It is time for it to be renewed. Pope Francis said at a meeting with religious superiors in November 2013 that it ‘was useful at the time, but now it is out of date.’⁶ The time is ripe for a new vision of the role of religious in the Church, which protects our distinctive vocation so that it may flourish.

Many congregations see their lay associates as the future bearers of their charism. Even if the congregation disappears, the baton is handed over. This is wonderful and highly desirable. This form of belonging to a religious order is a vast contribution to the mission of the Church. I met a Vietnamese Dominican last week, and he tells me that now in Vietnam there are 117,000 lay Dominicans. In much of the country, they are the Church.

But our cherishing of these members of our communities should not undermine the glorious craziness of the vowed life. If lay associates become virtually undistinguishable from the vowed members of a community, then the flame of religious life may be concealed under a bushel.

In the 1980s, it looked as if the Francophone Dominican Province was doomed to extinction. There were no vocations for the friars. The most vital community was a mixed community of brothers, sisters and lay Dominicans. They all shared in the life and government of community. It was so successful that, surprise, surprise, young men began to turn up who

⁶ Reported in *La Civiltà Cattolica* in Jan. 2014

wanted to become friars. We had to establish again a community in which they could learn to live the vowed life. It was really delicate, how to do this without the mixed community feeling rejected.

So then, Simeon and Anna witness to the Lord by the joy of their lives, even though they are nearing death. And so it will be for some of us.

Mary and Joseph

And then there are Mary and Joseph. They have a different challenge, raising their child Jesus. Simon warns Mary: ““This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed ³⁵ so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too.”” There were moments when Jesus must have been a puzzling son, not at all choosing a suitable career path.

Now of course the Saviour of the world will not be applying to join any of our congregations, though applicants may sometimes think that they are! But some of us do have the challenge of welcoming younger people from another generation with other ways of understanding things. Most of the people joining the English Province of my Order are in their twenties, though some congregations are receiving older people. This is a joy and also sometimes a sword piercing our hearts.

The biggest challenge for religious life is often tension between generations. Some of my generation dismiss many of the young as conservative, and some of the young look at us oldies as wishy washy cherry picking Catholics. The unity of the community cannot be founded on sharing the exactly same vision of religious life and our mission. Any congregation which insists that the young think the same way as earlier generations would only last one generation. It has to be a unity which is able to embrace profound differences. It has to embrace people who were drawn to the Church because of Pope Benedict, and people who deeply love Pope Francis!

I think of a Latin American Province of my Order which strongly embraced the option for the poor. Wonderful! Then young men came sniffing who had a slightly different understanding of religious life, who were excluded. They do not think like us and so cannot join. Religious life has to embrace difference.

This is deeply countercultural. Our society is afraid of difference. Internet communities link the likeminded. If you disagree radically, then you can just disconnect. Richard Sennet wrote,

‘The image of the community is purified of all that may convey a feeling of difference, let alone conflict, in who “we” are. In this way the myth of community solidarity is a purification ritual... What is distinctive about this mythic sharing in communities is that people feel they belong to each other, and share together, *because they are the same*⁷.’ As Lady Thatcher once asked, ‘Are you one of us?’

Being ‘one of us’ cannot be founded on utter unanimity of vision. It must be nurtured, with immense patience and commitment, over years. It requires all of our and their imagination and intelligence. There are all sorts of difference, of culture, language, ethnicity, sexual orientation. Everything depends on our ability to talk and listen to each intelligently and truthfully. I have to imagine what it is like to be a 23 year old convert who joins the Order.

For us to embrace new generations and move from Candlemas to spring, at least four things are needed, and I only have time to look at each briefly: a profound understanding of our identity as religious; courageous and creative leadership, a radical sense of the call, and a contemplative life.

Identity

First of all, we need a profound understanding of identity: our identity as members of our congregation, and their identity as members of another generation. Millennials are looking for communities which have a clear identity but which resonates with their own sense of identity. If a community has no clear identity, why join it? And if it does not accommodate the sort of identity that the young seek, they cannot be at home in it. So the question of identity is crucial for the future of religious life.

So what is the identity of this generation who may knocking on our doors? Earlier generations had pretty clear identities. I am a child of the sixties, when everything seemed possible. On the streets of Paris, we loved the graffiti, ‘*l’imagination au pouvoir*.’ Then you had Generation X and so on. But the millennials, born after 1981, are harder to define. Scott Seider and Howard Gardner call it the ‘Fragmented Generation.’ Frequently millennials refuse to be typecast as millennials! On the web you can create any identity you want. They forge multiple identities. You could be a Dominican and a Jesuit at the same time....perhaps!

⁷ ‘The myth of purified community’, *The Uses of Disorder: Personal Identity and City Style* London 1996, p.36, quoted by Z Bauman op.cit. 180.

The ones who come to us today want a clear identity. For some, this is symbolised by the habit. Others are quite happy with discreet signs. But the crucial question is this: what does it mean to have an identity as a religious or indeed a Christian? On the web, identities are chosen and crafted. You market your brand! But if it is just a consumerist choice in the religious supermarket, why should one not make another choice tomorrow? You do not have to shop at Waitrose for ever.

But the Christian identity is rather odd. It is utterly clear. We are Christians. And each congregation has its traditions and charism. But in another sense, Christian identity always lies ahead, waiting to be discovered. As St John says, in one of my favourite passages of Scripture: ² 'Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he^[a] is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is.'

Identity as a Salesian or a Poor Clare is not a consumer choice. It is the response to the one who calls us by name and summons us to become what we cannot now imagine. Entering the Dominicans did not settle my identity once and for all. It was the promise that it was here, with these brothers until death, that I would go on listening to the Lord, as I entered more deeply into the mystery of his life. One Yes after another, with the occasional No! Three steps forward and one back.

I expect that you have all seen *of gods and men*, the story of the small community of Trappist monks who lived in Algeria in the nineties, and were deeply embedded in the local Muslim village. They find themselves caught up in the rising tide of violence, both of the terrorists and of the Algerian government. They must decide whether to go or stay and face death. In this film we see them deepening their vocation and slowly discovering who they are. The Prior says towards the end of the film: 'I think that each of us discovered that to which Jesus Christ beckons us. It's to be born. Our identities as people go from one birth to another. And from each birth to birth we'll end up bringing to the world the child of God that we are.'

Any Christian vocation is a promise *not* to know fully who you are until you meet the Lord face to face, and then you will be beyond caring. I have lived in communities of formation most of my religious life. Every new batch challenges me to discover more deeply who I am with them, and who they are with me. Being a Dominican in my case means that it is with these people, as their brother that I will journey towards the unknowable mystery of God. So yes, a clear identity but never a closed identity.

For most of us, the unfolding of our identity as religious means passing through crisis. Think of Abram becoming Abraham. Crisis after crisis, getting into a tangle with Pharaoh, passing off his wife as his sister, almost sacrificing his son Isaac. Or Peter becoming Cephas, falling on his face often. The congregations which will flourish will be those who give each other the courage to live through crisis. Crises can be the best thing to happen to anyone.

In some cultures crises are feared. If young brother or sister X has a crisis, then lets send them off before they unsettle everyone else. And sometimes the young feel ashamed of having got into a mess, and flee, only to join another congregation where the pattern will be repeated all over again. I am told that this often happened in Brazil. So religious life should be a wonderful place in which to make a mess of things, fall on your face, but be helped to your feet and carry on. Just wait for my autobiography!

Leadership

Then there is leadership. We will not make it to spring without courageous leadership. Western society is living through a crisis of authority. Think of President Trump. Well, let's not think of President Trump! The age of deference is over. Politicians, experts, academics, heads of multinationals companies, judges and lawyers no longer can assume that they have authority.

And so it is not surprising that according to David Nygren and Miriam Ukeritis, looking at religious life in America, there is a crisis of authority in religious life too. They write: 'Authority in religious life, as in the Church itself, is perhaps the most pressing question for religious life to resolve... Several factors inhibit the exercise of effective leadership in religious orders. The nature of authority is widely contested, consensual decision making-making processes have little form, membership is generally unwilling to relinquish authority to those given responsibility, and the concept of personal "call" often eclipses any willingness to work on behalf of the congregational ends.'⁸

So in this climate, exercising credible and strong authority is going to be difficult, but without it, there will be no future. No young people will want to give their lives to an institution which has no direction. The key is to retain the initiative. With shrinking numbers it is easy for leadership to become reactive, solving problems and staggering alone, trying to keep the show on the road. The question can never be 'What shall we close?' It must always be 'what

⁸ David Nygren and Miriam D. Ukeritis 'The Religious Life Futures Project: Executive Summary', Review for Religious, January-February 1993, p. 45

do we want to open', even if that entails massive closures. It is better to close four communities in order to open one, than to close three just to stagger on.

Most congregations have opted for some form of leadership team. I am not sure that it would work for the Dominican friars, since no one would accept to be among the led! Mind you when we had superiors, no one would accept to be an inferior. When Michael Campbell Johnson SJ and I were running what was then called the Conference of Major Religious Superiors, we called it the conference of minor religious inferiors. So my question would be: if you have a leadership team, how can it steel itself to take courageous and creative decisions?

The Radical Call.

We need courageous leadership because religious life will make no sense for the young unless it is a radical call. Mary's heart was pierced because her son boldly set out for Jerusalem where he suffered and died. The millennials see religious life as a radical decision to follow Christ⁹. If it is not heroic calling, what is the point, whether this be the courage to embrace a contemplative life or to be sent on mission? In the sixteenth century, religious flocked to preach the gospel in Asia. Almost half of the Spanish Dominicans sent on these missions died before they arrived, of shipwreck, capture by pirates, illness or exhaustion. Hundreds of Dominicans, Franciscans and Jesuits, to name just a few orders, were martyred.

Our society, obsessed with health and safety, is risk adverse. Do we have the courage to challenge the timidity of our culture and send our brothers and sisters on missions that may cost them much, even their lives? More religious were martyred in twentieth century than in all of previous history. When the Trappists were martyred in Algeria we went and asked all of our brothers there whether they wished to stay or go and that we would support them whatever their decision. They all decided to stay and three months later one of them, Bishop Claverie of Oran, was also murdered. In that book of interviews, Michael Anthony Perry OFM says, 'In baptism, we have renounced the right to be afraid.' I think that Aquinas would prefer to say that we should not be the prisoner of our fears. So, if you accept young religious, ask them to do crazy things.

Finally and extremely briefly, I think that the future of religious life depends on us rediscovering the contemplative core to our way of being. Karl Rahner famously said that the

⁹ C.f Sister Nathalie Becquart *Quelques éléments*, and *New Generations* passim

Christian of this century would be a mystic. We cannot flourish in this wonderful, joyful, perilous and uncertain way of life if we are not inhabited by a tranquil silence. In this twitchy, restless world, forever checking our emails, and rushing to meetings, can we be still? One of the mottos of the Dominican Order is *contemplari et contemplata aliis trader*. To contemplate and give the fruits of contemplation to others. We must not let activism destroy the contemplative centre of our being.

St John of the Cross said: ‘The Father spoke one Word, which was his Son, and this Word he always speaks in eternal silence, and in silence it must be heard by the soul.’¹⁰ And so I had better be silent myself and stop!

¹⁰ *Maxims on Love*, 21 in *The Collected Works of St John of the Cross*, trans K. Kavanaugh and R. Rodriguez, Institute of Carmelite Studies, Washington DC, 1979, p.675