

H O R I Z O N

JOURNAL OF THE NATIONAL RELIGIOUS VOCATION CONFERENCE

VOLUME 28

NUMBER 2

WINTER 2003

Dimensions of Diversity NRVC Convocation 2002

- Fools for Christ: Promoting vocations in tumultuous times** 3
by Paul Bednarczyk, CSC
- Issues of sexual diversity and the call to religious life** 8
by Donna Markham, OP
- Toward a new understanding of
cultural encounter in our communities** 13
by Marie Chin, RSM
- Welcoming “the other” in our midst** 19
by Rev. Virgilio Elizondo
- Sexual diversity and contemporary U.S. religious life** 23
by Seán D. Sammon, FMS
-

Going deeper with diversity

I love diversity when it stays superficial. Eating new foods in ethnic restaurants. Exploring exotic terrain on a trip. Trying out a few words of another language. Cool!

But, if I really loved diversity in all its complexity and conflict, my husband wouldn't have to remind me, "Not everyone is you, Carol." Because, let's face it, when we have to deal closely in an ongoing, daily way with people vastly different from us, it's hard. Diversity, removed from the superficial level, is like the difference between delight at a child offering a fistful of dandelions and frustration when the same child makes you late by dressing his own way, ever-so-slowly, in out-of-season clothes. It's easy to love the dandelion child, but if you stick around long enough and share life closely enough, you're going to face the "I'll dress my way" child, too.

Community life means sticking around for the "I'll dress my way" moments that will arise—the frustration at brothers and sisters who swear the same allegiance as you but want to live it very differently. Who understand the vows differently. Who experience church in a way you detest. Whose sexual orientation makes you seriously uncomfortable.

As vocation ministers your job is to welcome new members who cannot help but be different from the members already there (who have their differences as well!). Newcomers might be a different generation, understand the church differently, pray differently, speak differently—the list goes on. You can't ignore their diversity, nor the diversity that already exists within your congregation.

We need guidance. Child-rearing books are spilling off the shelves, but there is much less ink devoted to the complexities of welcoming new members to religious communities within a diverse church and society. The National Religious Vocation Conference devoted its fall 2002 Convocation to the issues of diversity, and we're proud to share that content here in the pages of HORIZON.

To steal a thought from Rev. Virgilio Elizondo (page 19), let's embrace diversity with all the problems it brings because by welcoming "the other," we welcome God. After all, God might come bearing dandelions, or he might be stamping a foot and dressing his own way.

—Carol Schuck Scheiber, Editor

Fools for Christ: Promoting vocations in tumultuous times

by Paul Bednarczyk, CSC

This address was delivered at the opening of the September, 2002 Convocation of National Religious Vocation Conference.

In a former life of mine, I was the Assistant Headmaster of an overseas boarding school for five years. Part of my responsibility was being the Director of the Resident Program, which, for all practical purposes, translates into being the surrogate mother and father to over 40 adolescent boys during probably the most significant, formative years of their lives. Now in order to survive this, I learned early on that it was necessary to maintain a sense of humor.

It was during the middle of the week when one of my resident students came to my room complaining about a cyst above his right eye. To be truthful, it was a giant pimple, but to a 15-year-old, three days before a weekend dance, an overgrown zit is major crisis time. Trying to be sensitive to his predicament, I told him not to touch it, but to put a warm facecloth on it, so that it would be drawn out naturally. So off he went to his room and got his facecloth. After about 30 minutes, he came back to my room and told me the facecloth could not retain the heat and asked what should he do now. Still trying to be patient, I gently suggested getting a bowl of hot water, so as the facecloth cooled, he could dip it into the water so as to extend the heat compress. So off he went again. About an hour later, he showed up in my room for a third time, this time telling me that the water was now cold and asking what should he do now. At that point, trying to be light-hearted, but at the same time trying to communicate that I was losing patience, I asked him to get a pot of hot water and to put his head into it and to see if that worked. Now it was a long day, I was tired, and I admit that it was not one of my most stellar, pastoral moments!

Well, lo and behold, later that evening while I was making my rounds before lights out, here was this

sophomore sitting at his desk with his head tilted in this large pot filled with hot water, and he had one eye and one ear completely submerged. After quickly asking him what in God's name he was doing, in all innocence, his response simply was: "Well, don't yell at me! This is what you asked me to do!"

Yes, it most certainly was. As foolish as it was, it is what I had asked him to do. And he did it! In the midst of the ridiculous, there was a response to an invitation that was rooted in blind trust.

I tell this story this evening because I believe it is a good illustration of where we find ourselves today in vocation ministry.

Challenging times

To say that this year has not been an easy one for any of us is an understatement. Next week our nation will commemorate that fatal day when our world watched in unprecedented horror as terrorism shattered the equilibrium of our very existence, and pierced our hearts with a colossal grief never before imagined. If we had any faith at all in our economy before, by now it most certainly has been shaken by the corporate greed and corruption of those in executive leadership. With the escalating violence and possible further threats of war in the Mideast, the dream of a peaceful resolution between Israeli/Palestinian tensions seems more distant now than ever. And last but not least, we have all suffered to varying degrees from the humilia-

Paul Bednarczyk, CSC is Executive Director of National Religious Vocation Conference. A member of the Congregation of Holy Cross, Eastern Province of Brothers, he has been involved in vocation ministry since 1993.

tion of our own Church's transgressions. The scandals, the disillusionment, the anger and the shame have rattled us to our very core. We have read article after article speculating on the Church's survival. We have watched news program after news program address the impact of these recent events on the Church's faithful. We have heard the analysis of poll after poll targeting the shifting, the agreeing, and the dissenting views and attitudes about the Church and its teachings in the aftermath. And in the midst of this public sinfulness,

The temptation is to lay low and to batten down the hatches until this storm passes, but now is not the time to hunker down. If we do, then by adhering to our silence, we compromise our prophetic role as men and women religious who walk by Easter's light. Besides, even in the midst of our present difficulties, who are we to say with such arrogance that the Spirit no longer invites?

confusion and uncertainty, we vocation directors faithfully invite men and women to consider religious life and priesthood because we continue to believe it is vital to the fulfillment of the Church's mission. Some tell us that we are foolish. They say it is ridiculous to think that anyone in their right mind, given the values of our western culture or present Church climate, would even consider a religious vocation. Sadly, some of these people are even members of our own religious communities.

It is true. God has asked us to do the seemingly ridiculous and foolish, but like my former 15-year-old resident student, and like many of our greatest heroes in religious life, we oblige with total faith because we trust implicitly the One who asks.

The history of our Church is filled with dynamic characters who, because of a profound experience of Divine love and grace, risked the foolish in order to accomplish the wonderful work of God's plan. To the horror of his family and to the dismay of his fellow townspeople, Francis renounced his material wealth and pranced naked in the streets of Assisi, beginning a campaign of arduous reform within the Church. After

being so moved by the sermons of Blessed John of Avila, St. John of God sought God's mercy by publicly beating himself as a sign of repentance. Being committed to a mental hospital for his raw display of emotion, he eventually sought consolation in meeting the needs of the sick poor and founded the Brothers Hospitallars. At the derision of a segregated society and those who thought she was a fool for wasting her family's money, St. Katherine Drexel, a member of a prestigious Philadelphia family, courageously risked all and devoted her life and inheritance to the education of Native and African American children. We can all share stories of our own founders and foundresses, who in their own ways braved the foolish and the ridiculous in order to further build the Kingdom of God. Their radical embrace of the Gospel caused them to live in tension, but their total trust in God's promise brought the Church to a refreshing new and holier life.

As vocation ministers, we walk in their shoes. Like them, we go in a tense time about our work, no matter how ridiculous or foolish it may appear, because this is simply what God has asked of us. Fortified by our own experiences of God's steadfast fidelity and our own love for this life, we continue to minister faithfully, confident that our efforts will bear fruit for our religious communities and for our Church.

St. Paul on Christian unity

Brothers and sisters, remember that you were aliens and strangers to the covenants of promise. But now—in Christ Jesus—you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For Christ is our peace. In his flesh he has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us, that he might create in himself one new humanity, thus making peace. So Christ came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him, both of us have access in one Spirit. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.

—Ephesians 2, 12-22

Critical moment to promote vocations

While the cynics say that it is time to give up, I believe there has never been a more important or crucial time for vocation promotion. True, the temptation is there for us to lay low and to batten down the hatches until this storm passes, but now is not the time to hunker down. If we do, then by adhering to our silence, we compromise our prophetic role as men and women religious who walk by Easter's light. Besides, even in the midst of our present difficulties, who are we to say with such arrogance that the Spirit no longer invites? When any storm blows with winds and rain of full force, it is a reminder of the awesome power of God. This storm of scandal, sexual misconduct and cover-up is no different. Here we are forcefully, not gently, being reminded that we are finite creatures totally dependent upon an all-merciful, all-powerful God. Let us take consolation, however, knowing that what follows every storm is the promise of a bright new day.

Presently, for the sake of our Church, we need to be the men and women who bear the daylight of this hope. When people face disillusionment and discontent, they yearn to be inspired by tangible signs of hope to nourish their unbelief. As religious, and especially as vocation ministers, we need to stand up, to incarnate that gospel hope to one another and to the people we serve and with whom we discern. The truth is that the fidelity and integrity with which we publicly live out our common call to holiness have now become part of our mission and ministry in a way they have never been before. If religious life is going to see tomorrow's new light, the People of God need to be inspired not just by well-meaning priests, brothers and sisters who happen to do good work. They need to be inspired by committed men and women who tenaciously live out their individual call to holiness with honesty, joy and union in Jesus Christ. We in the Church need to be nourished by the witness of these men and women risking the foolish and the ridiculous for something greater than themselves because they are madly in love with this crazy God whose love is both indiscriminate and unconditional.

Tapping the energy of youth

Our hope, though, does not have to be contrived nor rooted in Pollyanna, naïve optimism, for the Spirit does give us encouraging signs for our future which invite our rejoicing and thanksgiving. Despite our present challenges, our faithful are not leaving the Church. In fact, they are rediscovering their voice. Our

young people, especially those of the much studied and much talked about Millennial Generation, demonstrate the Christian values of service, community, prayer and generosity, predisposing them to a readiness and willingness for the future possibility of religious life and priesthood. Those of us who attended

The truth is that the fidelity and integrity with which we publicly live out our common call to holiness have now become part of our mission and ministry in a way they have never been before.

this past summer's World Youth Day in Toronto were refreshed by the exuberance of their faith, their love for the Church and their zeal for a deeper experience and expression of God in their lives. As I overheard one young woman say as she surveyed thousands of people singing and swaying to the music of the opening Mass, "This is just soooooo cool! It's like we're this one big Catholic machine! Just feel the energy!" And as we all know, each of our congregations' machinery at this point could use a little oiling with that youthful energy.

Likewise, this past April, in Montreal, over 1,100 delegates gathered for the Third Continental Congress on Vocations. Over 130 of these delegates were young adults from both the United States and Canada. Out of a desire to speak with one shared voice, they issued a statement articulating their hopes for the North American Church. As I read some of the excerpts of that statement, I invite you to listen to their challenges and to their desire to learn more from us.

Excerpts from young adult statement

- Everything we ask of the church we will offer in return....We seek wisdom and knowledge and will use those gifts in return to enrich our Church.
- Please openly witness to your faith by being available. Specifically to you who live the consecrated life and serve as ordained ministers, offer us authentic joyful witnesses to your way of life, that we may experience the passion of your service. Invite us to share your excitement and deep love of Christ and the Church.
- Inspire us with open dialogue, a dialogue where

we will recognize our responsibility and accountability.

- We invite the religious to share personal authentic stories with us, including their struggles and joys.
- As Catholic young adults...we ask you to enrich our identity by providing us with opportunities for meaningful catechesis, ongoing formation and education.

At the evening vigil service at World Youth Day, Pope John Paul told the young people gathered: "The aspiration that humanity nurtures, amid countless injustices and sufferings, is the hope of a new civilization

Young Catholics want to be those builders of a future Church. The desire is there. Their hearts are open, as are their hands. And they look to us to guide and to teach them.

marked by freedom and peace. But for such an undertaking, a new generation of builders is needed. You must be those builders. The future is in your hearts and in your hands."

From what we have seen at the Congress, at World Youth Day and at parishes and campuses across the nation, young Catholics want to be those builders of a future Church. The desire is there. Their hearts are open, as are their hands. And they look to us to guide and to teach them in the ways of the foolish and the ridiculous. God is gifting us and our congregations with a graced opportunity to contribute to the building of that future church. We cannot afford to miss it.

We come here to San Antonio, in the spirit of the words of St. Paul so appropriately echoed in our opening song—no longer as "strangers." As Christians, for 2,000 years we have not been strangers to suffering nor to joy. Neither pain nor healing is alien to our experience. We have seen that with sin comes mercy, and with humiliation comes redemption. For in Christ Jesus, we "who were once far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For Christ is our peace."

For the next three days we will be discussing our response to the dimensions of diversity. In his apostolic

letter, "The Beginning of the New Millennium," Pope John Paul II reminds us that "the unity of the Church is not uniformity, but an organic blending of legitimate diversities. It is the reality of many members joined in a single body, the one body of Christ (cf. 1 Cor. 12:12)."

One of the unexpected blessings for those of us who had attended the Continental Congress was having the profound experience of "church" in its truest form with all of this "organic blending" of diversity. There we were, English, Spanish and French speaking North Americans, bishops, religious educators, parents, young adults, married folks, priests, sisters and brothers, liberal, conservative, habited and non-habited sitting at one table discussing what means most to us—our faith, our Church, our vocations, our future. In keeping with our Church tradition, like Peter and Paul, we had our differences of opinion and approach, but we made the effort prayerfully and respectfully to listen to one another.

In an essay on unity and diversity written for his friars, Father Timothy Radcliffe, OP, former Master General of the Dominicans, wrote: "...it takes time and patience to listen to one another. It also requires reflection, the effort to understand each other.... Diversity need not make us mutually incomprehensible. The more deeply a brother lets the Word penetrate him, to touch and transform all that he is...then the more easily I will be able to recognize the working of God's grace in his life and feel close to him."

Focus on common life

By maintaining our focus at the Congress on our shared faith in Jesus Christ and our common love for the Church, something wonderful happened. We rediscovered the truth of St. Paul's words to the Ephesians. Through Jesus Christ we "have access in one Spirit," no matter what color or persuasion we are, what culture we come from, or what ecclesiology or ideology we uphold. As "citizens with the saints, and... members of the household of God" we grow together with Jesus Christ into a holy temple in the Lord. And as our experience at the Congress affirmed, that temple has room for all of us.

There is a tendency in our world to deal with diversity through isolationism, oppression and violence. For Catholics, however, it is at the base of our tradition to embrace our dissimilarities with one another. After all,

diversity is what makes the Catholic Church catholic. To quote Father Ronald Rolheiser, OMI, “The task of the Church is to stand toe to toe, shoulder to shoulder, and heart to heart with people absolutely different from ourselves—but who, with us, share one faith, one Lord, one baptism, and one God who is Father and Mother to us all.”

As we face a most critical time in our Church’s history, now is the time for us to stand shoulder to shoulder and heart to heart, united in our common faith in

As we face a most critical time in our Church’s history, now is the time for us to stand shoulder to shoulder and heart to heart, united in our common faith in Jesus Christ.

Jesus Christ. We are brothers and sisters “built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God” and in this holy dwelling of the Lord, there is no room for fear, for dissension, or for exclusivity, for we “are no longer strangers.” As St. Paul reminds us, even in the midst of our turmoil, Christ will always be our peace.

And what about my sophomore resident student? There is an ending to the story. The following morning he came rushing to my office to show me that his cyst had shrunk substantially. To me, now it was just a normal looking pimple, but he was just thrilled. “See Brother Paul!” he said with these big, wide eyes. “Look! The pot did work!”

So, my sisters and brothers, as we look forward to the coming light that will one day break our darkness, let us take heart, rejoice in our holy diversity, and together keep our faith in the One who invites, even when it seemingly does not make sense. For if we do, then just maybe, the foolish and the ridiculous for which we all long just may be possible after all. +

Dorothy Day on hope

When we have spiritual reading at meals, when we have the rosary at night, when we have study groups, forums, when we go out to distribute literature at meetings, or sell it on street corners, Christ is there with us. What we do is very little. But it is like the little boy with a few loaves and fishes. Christ took that little and increased it. He will do the rest. What we do is so little we may seem to be constantly failing. But so did he fail. He met with apparent failure on the Cross. But unless the seed fall into the earth and die, there is no harvest.

And why must we see results? Our work is to sow. Another generation will be reaping the harvest.

—From *Dorothy Day: Selected Writings*, edited by Robert Ellsberg, Orbis, 1993

Issues of sexual diversity and the call to religious life

by **Donna Markham, OP**

For the past 20 years or more, I have consistently declined to speak publicly on matters pertaining to sexual orientation. My decision to be silent in the public arena has been based on three convictions: it is too easy to be misinterpreted and thus become caught in endless, if not wearisome, debate on this issue; frankly, it has not been a topic that I believe is all that central to one's response to God's call to enter unreservedly into a communal life of consecrated celibacy in service to the Gospel. Lastly, my personal bias is that it is exceptionally dangerous to focus, in this post-modern climate, on issues such as sexual orientation differences that can potentially serve to divide us further as a faith community. Rather, I have turned my clinical attention toward formational matters that can solidify our rather fragile community of vowed women and men who struggle to witness to hope, reconciliation, forgiveness, and communion in this suffering world milieu. The issues I have chosen instead to attend to have included topics such as psychosexual integration and maturity; the ability to form and sustain adult relationships in the context of community; the capacity to live a committed life of integrity and fidelity; the ability to place the good that is held in common above narcissistic self-interest and personal comfort.

In other words, my life and soul-work as a Dominican who happens also to be a clinical psychologist takes its impetus from God's beneficent and mysterious call to a sundry group of people to enter into a community in mission in order to proclaim the Gospel in this fragmented world. This has been, and remains, my heartfelt conviction.

Nevertheless, given some of the personally troubling subterranean whispering regarding rumoured directives about the suitability of homosexual persons to respond to God's call to proclaim the mercy and compassion of Jesus as a religious or priest, I feel it is important to move beyond my reticence and address the

issue. I do so not as a theologian, but as a long-time student of religious life and of the human sciences. I do so from the vantage point of someone who has spent most of my religious life in some aspect of initial or ongoing formation—as a member of the faculty in a major seminary, as a formation consultant to my own and many other religious institutes, and as a clinician who has been involved in assessing applicants to seminaries and religious life, and as one who has clinically treated religious and clergy. Most importantly, I do so as one who believes we are clearly asking the wrong question. The issue is not one of sexual orientation but one of relational integration.

In the light of those introductory comments, I would like to summarize some of the current areas of investigation concerning the issue of sexual orientation, simply to elucidate what a complex issue it is and, perhaps ideally, to lay to rest some of the antiquated and overly simplistic opinions on the matter. I will then propose what I believe to be a more informed approach, given the essence of our lives as vowed women and men; address some of the concerns about accepting homosexually-oriented persons into religious life; and, lastly, make a few comments about the formation agenda relative to this issue.

Donna Markham, OP, Ph.D. is an Adrian Dominican and the President of the Southdown Institute near Toronto, Ontario. Southdown is a multi-disciplinary mental health facility for treating church professionals. For the past 25 years, Sister Donna has been particularly engaged in issues pertaining to leadership development, organizational transformation, community formation, group analysis, and depth psychotherapeutic treatment. She is a published author and international workshop presenter. Most recently, she has established a clinical outreach program to serve the Inuit in the northeastern High Arctic.

Current areas of investigation

Simply stated, given the knowledge we possess at this point in the process of empirical inquiry, the aetiology of a person's sexual orientation remains unclear. The question as to whether a person has some control over sexual preference has long been part of the ongoing debate. The argumentation on that issue focuses around the issue of *choice* and *change*. That is, if a person has control over his or her sexual orientation, then it would seem that orientation could somehow be changed. If that is the case, then homosexual orientation is understood as a kind of "disorder" or "sickness" that makes one unsuitable for certain societal functions, including religious life, until that sickness is "cured." In classical analytic training, homosexuality was seen to be the result of a developmental arrest that, with proper psychotherapeutic intervention, could be worked through. To oversimplify, homosexual conflicts issuing from unresolved oedipal issues could be successfully addressed, thereby allowing the person to move to heterosexuality. This approach was subsequently seen to be deficient, inappropriate—even seriously damaging to persons, in some cases—and the majority of the clinical community learned that it had to be far more discriminating in its theorizing as well as in its approach to psychotherapy with persons who are homosexual.

That being said, there surely are those instances where a homosexual orientation developed as a result of psychosexual underdevelopment and environmental pressures. In these situations, the value of this more classical understanding is clearly apparent. An example of this would be a 13-year-old who entered seminary, never dated, had no understanding of his sexuality, engaged in sexual exploration with his classmates and, as a result, concluded that he was gay. Similarly, the teenaged girl who entered the pre-postulancy program, never dated, grew up asexual in an all-female environment, and found herself infatuated with the junior professed, therefore determining she must be lesbian. The case for psychosexual developmental arrest could, in those particular instances, be made. At the very least, it would be a legitimate hypothesis to test in the course of psychotherapy. The now evident clinical error of some practitioners trained in previous decades, however, was to assume that all persons who identified themselves as homosexual were the result of developmental arrestation.

What more are we learning? *Genetic studies* on monozygotic and dizygotic twins suggest that genes

do, in fact, appear to be a significant factor—not the sole factor, however—in determining sexual orientation. Because of the sample sizes and the inherent difficulties in conducting such research, the case has not been made as strongly for female sexual orientation as it has been made for male orientation. Also, it should be clear that this research remains in its early stages and there is much work that is currently being undertaken to replicate various studies and add to the body of this genetic research. Nonetheless, it is a compelling body of work that cannot be ignored in considering the case for the influence of genetics.

Simply stated, given the knowledge we possess at this point in the process of empirical inquiry, the aetiology of a person's sexual orientation remains unclear.

There has also been preliminary *hormonal research* looking at disturbances in prenatal androgen levels and the influence this has on sex- and gender-related behavior. Other *neuro-anatomical* studies have been directed toward examining the structures of the brains of homosexual and heterosexual persons. This work remains in its infancy and is far from conclusive. Further, *social environmental* and *behavioral theories* have focused on the learning of prescribed social roles, the reinforcement of same-sex social contacts, as having an influence on the development of homosexual orientation. Empirical research in this area, however, has been sparse and inconsistent. What seems to be clear is that environment does play some role in the development of sexual orientation, but what those precise environmental factors are and to what extent they have influence is yet unknown. [These issues are superbly elaborated upon in the recent book, *Sexual Diversity and Catholicism: Toward the Development of Moral Theology*, edited by Jung and Coray. (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2001).]

We also are aware that most human beings possess heterosexual and homosexual attractions and are poised somewhere along a continuum of sexual orientation with few, if any, people being totally one or the other.

In light of the complexity of the issue, most responsible clinicians make few assumptions about the aetiol-

ogy of sexual orientation today. The most we can say is that there are biological and environmental factors that contribute to our sexual orientation. More to the point, the fundamental task of the therapist is to assist a human being in coming to terms with living as a self-aware, responsible, productive agent in society—able to love, commit, and contribute to the common good. The therapist’s function is to walk with an individual into those areas of conflict that impede the ability to become that self-reflective, relational and productive human being. It seems to me that this should be our focus in religious formation, as well—not on an individual’s sexual orientation. While there is no evidence to suggest that sexual orientation has direct bearing on the capacity to live a chaste, celibate life, what does seem apparent is that psychosexual integration, a clear sense of identity, and a capacity for enter-

the rich arena where we learn to capitalize on our commonality, be supported by one another and fortified in community for our shared life of service to the suffering poor.

Some of the more recent developments in personality theory elucidated by theorists such as Lorna Smith Benjamin and John Bowlby shed light on this important issue. These theorists delineate four basic relational styles plotted in three dimensional space along two axes. The vertical axis is the power axis; the horizontal, the affective axis. Each relational style incorporates a personal relational stance as well as a relational stance toward others.

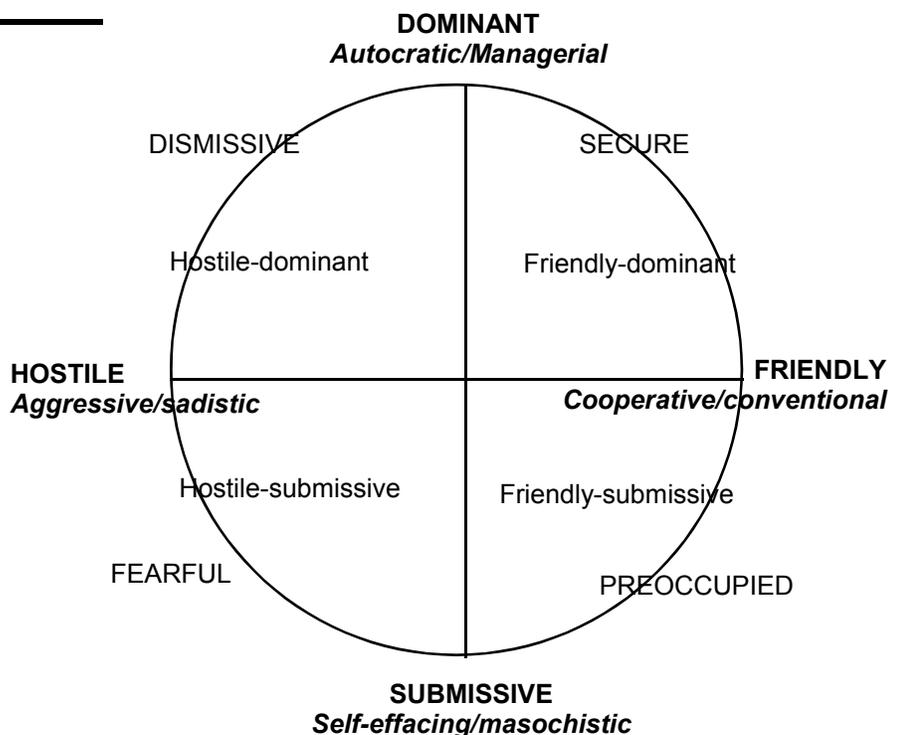
My basic conviction is that religious strive to be warm, caring women and men who en flesh the great command to love others as we have been loved by God. We are freed for that act of loving as we have come to love ourselves. Such a stance of regard for others and regard for self form the relational foundation for secure ministers. Acceptance of the self as a gift and expression of God’s love and the impetus to convey such love to others is not predicated on one or another sexual orientation. It is at the core of a well-adjusted human being. As such, it is at the heart of a healthy religious vocation. When the capacity to accept the self and others has been damaged and the capacity to ex-

While there is no evidence to suggest the sexual orientation has direct bearing on the capacity to live a chaste, celibate life, what does seem apparent is that psychosexual integration, a clear sense of identity, and a capacity for entering into adult relationships does impact the ability to live religious life with integrity and joy.

ing into adult relationships does impact the ability to live religious life with integrity and joy. Thus, the question we ask is whether an individual is capable of committing with integrity to a non-genital, non-possessive, generous life of service in response to the Gospel. It should not become a homophobic witch hunt for homosexually-oriented persons.

Assessing mature relational capacity

With that in mind, let me speak for a few moments on the issue of sexual diversity as I believe it is over-ridden by a person’s ability to form healthy attachments with others. In generous self-giving to others, the mission of Jesus takes expression in relationships. When we can transcend how diverse we are, we are then able to enter



tend compassion to others is limited, regardless of the reasons, persons should not be admitted to programs of formation.

In less egregious instances, where an individual is struggling to come to a sense of self-worth and acceptance but manifests the capacity and desire to care for others, consideration for admission may be postponed until such time as emotional and spiritual work can be sufficiently undertaken to address self-image and self-acceptance issues.

More seriously, I believe we must screen out those individuals who manifest disdain for others. No matter how such disregard may manifest itself, whether through passive disinterest, sarcasm, humiliation or overt hostility, persons with such characteristics do not belong in religious life. No amount of intelligence or superficial social finesse will offset the damage that such individuals can inflict upon the people of God. These individuals may be gay or straight, they may be young or old, they may be female or male. Their fundamental attitude toward others is one of exploitation, hostility, devaluation, arrogance, manipulation and entitlement. They have little or no substantive motivation to live a vowed life since their primary driving life-force is self-gratification. This serious disorder in the construct of the personality, not sexual orientation, should be the determining factor in prohibiting entrance into religious life. Because these persons fundamentally do not possess any significant regard for the well-being of others, nor are they particularly interested in contributing to the common good of society, they are prone to engage in antisocial behavior directed toward satisfying their own impulses. This behavior is apt to include sexual acting-out, deception, cheating, theft, and lying. If we were to look at clinical impressions, we would read words such as narcissistic, sociopathic, antisocial and exploitative, avoidant, sadomasochistic, dismissive. Along with that, we may see unintegrated sexuality.

These are the individuals who see themselves beyond any one else's rules or directives, including the commitment to live in accord with a public vow. The rules simply do not apply to them. We could readily make the case that it would be impossible for such individuals to live in accord with the vow of obedience. If we were to situate these persons in the context of psychosexual development, we would see perennially fixated, rebellious adolescents. Again, this is not an issue of sexual orientation. It is an issue of possessing the spiritual and emotional health for religious life.

(Parenthetically, the accurately diagnosed pedophile, the majority of whom are heterosexual, exhibits these kinds of characteristics and abuses power in order to inflate a severely inadequate ego solely focused on self-gratification.)

The *secure* homosexual or heterosexual candidate is able to become emotionally close to others, is comfortable depending on others and have others depend on him or her. They have achieved a level of self-acceptance and comfort that allows them to engage in mutually respectful, non-genital, intimate relationships that are spontaneous, gratifying and freeing for the

The *secure* homosexual or heterosexual candidate is able to become emotionally close to others, is comfortable depending on others and have others depend on him or her. They have achieved a level of self-acceptance and comfort that allows them to engage in mutually respectful, non-genital, intimate relationships that are spontaneous, gratifying and freeing for the mission.

mission. The candidate who is preoccupied with coming to terms with sexual orientation is quite likely to be directing energy far more intently toward answering questions about the self rather than being able to focus on assuming the identity of a member of a particular religious institute. While this is a stage that may be worked through, it poses significant difficulty for the process of incorporation into religious community.

Some concerns and recommendations

Recently, I invited a group of homosexually-oriented priests and religious to consult with me as I prepared for this presentation. One of the questions I asked concerned how to understand "campy" behavior (i.e., highly stereotypical, affected, gay subculture behavior), since this is often a point of concern and discussion among formators. One religious offered a particularly helpful insight: when any group of people is treated as an oppressed underclass, in an effort to come to a consolidated sense identity and solidarity, behavior may, for a time, be more extreme. Thus, as homosexual persons have often experienced themselves as shamed and devalued by the heterosexual

majority—sometimes to the point of being considered social pariahs—the need to identify with one another, to be exclusive and “separatist” is a step in solidifying a sense of self. Such a transitional stage of more excessive behavior reflects the struggle to consolidate deepened senses of identity and belonging.

We are certainly aware of similar trends among other socially oppressed groups. For example, when Latin American base communities remain solely focused on their own neighborhood, ignoring the plight of other oppressed groups or communities, they speak about getting caught in a condition they refer to as ‘*basismo*.’ Such a fixated state impedes progress toward true liberation. Thus, the willingness to expand the agenda, to network with others, to “move beyond the neighborhood” into the larger social arena attests to the true self-actualization of the oppressed group.

The problem of an entrenched gay subculture suggests a block in those persons’ ability to move toward sufficient internalization and integration of their sexual orientation. I would maintain that should this occur in a house of formation, candid appraisal of the participating individuals’ relational integration needs to be undertaken and decisions about continuance must follow. Entrenched subcultures of any type endorse separatism and act against the common good.

Similarly, the problem of an entrenched gay subculture suggests a block in those persons’ ability to move toward sufficient internalization and integration of their sexual orientation. I would maintain that should this occur in a house of formation, candid appraisal of the participating individuals’ relational integration needs to be undertaken and decisions about continuance must follow. Entrenched subcultures of any type endorse separatism and act against the common good. They have no place in our religious houses.

As I reflected on these thoughts, it seemed that the struggle for self-acceptance lay at the root. Were we to think about the relational circumplex, individuals manifesting such sustained behavior likely stand in need of more substantive inner work in order to engage in the formational task of assuming identity as a

member of the religious institute. Ideally, this personal work should be adequately resolved prior to entrance into a formation program.

Another concern is the tension about how open the homosexual candidate should be. As one member of my consulting group reminded me, “We are as sick as our secrets.” Thus, to be placed in a position of never being able to talk openly about one’s struggles to live the vowed life perpetuates a sick system. Nonetheless, to make homosexual orientation a focal issue seems equally erroneous. Open dialogue on adult sexual issues and struggles, on the integration of one’s sexuality with spirituality, and on the desire to embrace consecrated celibacy must be an ongoing component in the formation process. We have witnessed the devastation wrought by silence and secrecy in these matters. Fears around self-disclosure or threats of dismissal because of sexual orientation force important issues underground and serve to entrench a deeply flawed system where exploitative acting-out behavior becomes a predictable consequence.

Each person’s story differs; each person’s way of experiencing herself or himself as a sexual being wishing to make a life commitment of consecrated celibacy will differ. What is essential is that the stories are free to be shared and that an atmosphere of openness and trust permeate the experience of incorporation.

Finally, I do not think that we can underestimate the significance of the formator’s mentoring. Well-integrated formation directors who are comfortable with their own sexuality and at ease in their vowed commitment will likely be of greater influence than any course or class on the vows or on sexuality. Despite the fact that formation directors and candidates may be close to chronological peers, the director is a powerful mentor to those aspiring to the vowed life. The formator is not a friend to the candidate, nor a “vacation buddy,” nor a peer who shares the totality of his or her sexual history with a candidate. Such boundary crossings have a profoundly deleterious effect on the formation process and have, at times, resulted in serious abuses of power.

Directors are examples of healthy sexual, relational, and spiritual integration. As such, you hold the wonderful possibility of mentoring a healthier religious life where persons are increasingly freed to be most themselves, exquisitely diverse, but deeply unified as sisters and brothers on fire with the Gospel. ✚

Toward a new understanding of cultural encounter in our communities

by Marie Chin, RSM

I must admit that it was foolhardy to agree to address this conference and the Vocation Congress in the same year. I've been feeling that I really have nothing new to say to you. In this state of mind I went whining to one of my team members, Sheila Carney. In her inimitable way, she simply asked me if I had heard the story of St. John on the island of Patmos. Every day he would simply say to his disciples, "My children, love one another." The story goes that one day, bored with the repetition, his disciples went to him and stated their case. "Master," they said, "have you nothing else to say to us?" "Ah," John said, "the day I see you living that message is the day I will stop repeating it."

Sheila walked with me for a couple more steps in silence, then she told me another story: A Greek master was addressing his disciples and, wanting to assure them that they were advancing well in their spiritual life, he told them how frequently he could actually see Jesus himself in them. "However," he conceded, "occasionally I see one of you and I can't help thinking, 'Jesus Christ, is it you again!'"

On a more serious note, as I listened underneath the stories, I was faced with the truth of myself—how much the desire to be different and original was prompting my feeling like a "talking head." It is a common and curious fact that all of us want to be different and yet when we face difference in *others* we often don't know how to deal with it. *Difference, otherness confounds us.* Difference, otherness becomes a problem because of our spontaneous tendency to curve in on ourselves and become the reference point of everything around us.

The focus of my presentation comes from this realization. Any exploration of cultural diversity must take into consideration how we perceive, feel about, and behave towards "otherness." If we are serious about our exploration, we will find that only too often we af-

firm that which belongs to our world and quickly deny, eliminate, or put on the periphery that which is different, strange, foreign to what we are accustomed to. I do not understand this "other" whether it be a person, an idea, a lifestyle, a worldview, an orientation, a theology or spirituality and so, it is not worth my respect or my appreciation. Every now and then, however, grace impinges on the thickness of human experience, a human being encounters an-other, and God's spirit creates an "event" of communion. Those we have discounted and placed on the periphery are drawn into sacred spaces where God connects all creation and the wide divide between "we" and "they" becomes very thin.

Toward an understanding of encounter

This is so clearly what the encounter between Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well shows us, that I invite you to visit this story once again as I attempt to articulate what I see as a needed way of being for all of us who share life in community. More specifically I invite a listening ear from you who are called by your congregations to accompany all sorts of people from diverse cultures who are discerning their life vocation. I shall use this story to assist us to move toward an understanding of encounter. The Samaritan woman is for me a prototype of the "stranger" in our lives.

Marie Chin, RSM is president of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas, whose international headquarters are in Silver Spring, Md. Over the past 20 years, she has given retreats and spiritual direction in the Caribbean, Pacific Islands, and the USA. She has also given presentations to religious congregations and church groups on various topics, especially in the areas of spirituality, jubilee justice, and multiculturalism.

When Jesus encounters Moriah—a name I have given this fascinating woman—he does something quite remarkable. He neither engages in the subtleties of a politics of distinction nor does he participate in the rituals of inequality. He crosses the walls of separation between gender, class, race and nation, between religion, theology, spirituality, and life experience. These distinctions don't matter, he says, as he asks for water from a stranger, a woman to boot—something obviously not done, for it is an astonished woman who blurts out, "how is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" A simple request for water

and yet one of the most empowering and liberating for Moriah. It's as if Jesus invites her from merely "looking on from afar" to a position of partnership, from being marginal (on account of what people define as "different") to taking a rightful place in the center and becoming a confidante to whom he entrusts his identity and mission. What follows in the encounter between Jesus and Moriah is a fascinating dance of reciprocity, a profound meeting of persons, a rich dialogue between two equals in the form of question and answer.

The woman at the well

Jesus came to a town of Samaria called Sychar, near the plot of land that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there. Jesus, tired from his journey, sat down there at the well. It was about noon.

A woman of Samaria came to draw water. Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." His disciples had gone into the town to buy food. The Samaritan woman said to him, "How can you, a Jew, ask me, a Samaritan woman, for a drink?"—For Jews use nothing in common with Samaritans.—Jesus answered and said to her,

"If you knew the gift of God
and who is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,'
you would have asked him
and he would have given you living water."

The woman said to him, "Sir, you do not even have a bucket and the cistern is deep; where then can you get this living water? Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us this cistern and drank from it himself with his children and his flocks?"

Jesus answered and said to her,
"Everyone who drinks this water
will be thirsty again;
but whoever drinks the water I shall give
will never thirst;
the water I shall give will become in him a
spring of water
welling up to eternal life."

The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water, so that I may not be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water." Jesus said to her, "Go call your husband and come back." The woman answered and said to him, "I do not have a husband." Jesus answered her, "You are right in saying, 'I do not have a husband.' For you have had

five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true." The woman said to him, "Sir, I can see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain; but you people say that the place to worship is in Jerusalem."

Jesus said to her,
"Believe me, woman, the hour is coming
when you will worship the Father
neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem.
You people worship what you do not understand;
we worship what we understand,
because salvation is from the Jews.
But the hour is coming, and is now here,
when true worshipers will worship the Father
in Spirit and truth;
and indeed the Father seeks such people to
worship him.
God is Spirit,
and those who worship him
must worship in Spirit and truth."

The woman said to him,
"I know that the Messiah is coming, the one
called the Christ; when he comes, he will tell
us everything." Jesus said to her, "I am he, the
one speaking with you."

At that moment his disciples returned, and were amazed that he was talking with a woman, but still no one said, "What are you looking for?" or "Why are you talking with her?" The woman left her water jar and went into the town and said to the people, "Come see a man who told me everything I have done. Could he possibly be the Christ?"

—John 4:5-29

In this profound meeting with Jesus, Moriah also uncovers the “inner twisting of conflict and the pounding of fear” (Donna Markova) within herself. She discovers she is a woman who is searching for truth—*who is God, and how is she to enter into relationship with God?* She is also full of questions (which, in the order of theological-spiritual wisdom are essential)—*where to worship? Who is interpreting the world for her?*

In this exchange of mutual respect, Jesus gradually reveals himself to her, and she in turn begins not only to recognize Jesus but to discover that God is different from what she had been taught. She discovers that God is not partial. God is a God of Spirit and Truth, a God who loves life and who journeys with people so that “they may have life and have it in abundance,” that is, life in its fullness, its wholeness.

What fascinates me is how Moriah draws on her experience and allows the conversation with Jesus to em-

I do not think it is far-fetched to say that the woman at the well finds her vocation to be fully human in this exchange with Jesus.

power her to take back her own light (insight) and voice and move towards a deeper level of listening; how she allows the conversation to transform her understanding and to stretch her mind and belief to move beyond what she had always known and held to be true to a truth that is more true. We see her move through astonishment and confusion and come to a wonderful, hopeful, determined clarity. The water which she was seeking from the well now becomes a fountain of life within her. Very simply the story tells us, “the woman left her water jar and went into the town to proclaim the good news.” Understanding is the liberating power that readies her for discipleship and mission. Moriah recognizes her call to be bearer of the good news that God comes to bring fullness of life to all people and she cannot keep it to herself. She leads the whole town to come and see and hear Jesus.

From two starting points: the profound experience of a personal encounter and relationship with God and the experience of coming home to herself (finding her own voice and seeing her own light), this woman begins to interpret revelation and reality from a different

vantage point with a view not only to personal liberation, but to the liberation of an entire people. Healing and wholeness is not for herself alone but for all creation.

Learnings

I do not think it is far-fetched to say that Moriah finds her vocation to be fully human in this exchange with Jesus. Several things become clear to me as I watch Jesus interacting with Moriah. The first thing I would draw to your attention is the fact that our daily human experience is the locus of God’s self-revelation. How important it is, therefore, to develop a contemplative attitude that wakens us from our embeddedness in the familiar and well-known to recognize and affirm our capacity to tune into the God dimension in every human experience, no matter how strange or different it might seem.

The second point of interest, on which I will spend considerable time, is the power that resides in contemplative listening. Schreier reminds us that the stories we tell about ourselves, both to ourselves and to others, become foundational for our very understanding of ourselves. He says that they constitute our truths; they tell us how we manage to be who we are. Much as stories need to be told, they also need to be received. When we share our story with another who is willing to be engaged, something within us begins to shift as it does in Moriah when, with great care, Jesus listened to her story without judging, evaluating, or trivializing any part. He listened beyond the words. He heard her conflicts, her fears, her need to be accepted for what she was without being judged and condemned. He heard the wounds beyond the aggressiveness, the insecurity beyond the pretense of self-confidence. Interestingly, Jesus recognized the everyday resistances in Moriah. He created the kind of space in which they could probe together the contours of the resistance, and in those spaces of resistance they uncovered energy, passion, vision, and faith.

We are told that the power for honesty, growth, freedom, wholeness comes from one’s own resources. It seems to me that Jesus’ attentive listening allowed this inner power to be at work in Moriah. As he gives his attention to her, Jesus literally *gives her back to herself*. She is able to transcend her suspicions and defensiveness, even her tendency to blame others. Her ability to be self-reflective, to gain insight, and eventually to claim her mission—might I say “vocation”—is restored. To help others see that they are acceptable and

more than any one piece of their historicity, that they are lovable, free, responsible co-creators in this world is truly to restore persons to themselves and to the world around them. To me, this is an act of justice—giving someone back to themselves so that they can walk into their life, their passion and vision. In this act of justice is also the greatest act of trust that anyone can give to another.

I notice, too, that in his encounter with Moriah, Jesus cannot be described as the “nice,” too-benevolent guy. He engages her where she is, at first hostile and feisty, but he is no pushover. He does not lose himself to accommodate her. He holds his ground gently but firmly. He does not allow himself either to be swayed unduly by the emotional field that surrounds them or to be as-

In his encounter with the woman at the well, Jesus cannot be described as the “nice,” too-benevolent guy. He engages her where she is, at first hostile and feisty, but he is no pushover. He does not lose himself to accommodate her. He holds his ground gently but firmly.

simulated into her perceptions and her way of thinking. Nor does Jesus see her as an extension of himself. There is a respectful gap, a healthy boundary between himself and Moriah that requires “reaching speech” to cross. What Jesus does is to act responsively towards Moriah and himself in a way that sustains connection between them. What we discover in the exchange is that true encounter occurs when we stand poised at the crossing-over point of our differences. There we are most in the Spirit. “Meeting God in the mystery of the other is where mysticism and mission converge” is how someone describes this phenomenon.

Veering toward a challenge

I bring this to your attention only because I wonder if in our desire to bridge the differences in our pluricultural world, we might not sometimes be too accommodating. We dissolve the boundaries of mystery and become so *laissez faire*, we lose our integrity and betray the trust of those whom we are helping to discern their vocation. I am reminded of Carol Gilligan’s observation that because of a nurturing attitude towards relationships, women are often faced with a choice be-

tween not hurting others and acting out of their truth. I believe this is true of all of us, women and men, who are involved in “helping” relationships. To my way of thinking, “accommodating behavior” that is really a form of lazy tolerance can be a way that we engage in the subtleties of making distinctions and participating in the rituals of inequality. It does not really sustain connection. Rather it sanctifies fragmentation and separation. It does not make room for the creative interplay of differences. In fact, it can be a way in which differences are controlled, and the mutuality and reciprocity that is desired for the transformation and the building of God’s kin’dom is subverted.

I see this mode of behavior in myself. How easily, for example, I take on the Rogerian nodding of the head, the “ah-huh” grunt, and a seeming receptivity that is really a “hard” wall devoid of the give and take of genuine engagement. I see this accommodation all around us. It rears its head in significant encounters and it characterizes many of our important human relationships. It is unhappily present among us in our religious communities and it plays itself out particularly around what I call “the labyrinth of cultures in religious life.” My concern is that despite the fact that we spend so much time trying to understand diversity and how to respond to it, we are not dealing effectively or creatively with our differences in community. Generally we attribute the tensions among us to all kinds of factors. We give little consideration to the fact that they may have been occasioned by psychological distances and aggravated by cultural differences. We give little recognition to the fact that even if certain social disturbances have their origin in other causes than cultural, they can be heightened by a clash of cultural perceptions. My fear is that we are often guilty of accommodating behavior in this regard. We ignore the tensions and go about our lives as if they do not exist.

Labyrinth of cultures

At this point it may be well to say something about this “labyrinth of cultures.” Leaning heavily on David Couerier, OFM, I suggest that there are at least four different cultures co-existing in religious life today: essentialist, existentialist, liberation, feminist. These cultures are all trying to flow peacefully alongside one another in religious life. It is a very complex situation in which they interplay, intersect, coincide and are often at cross-purpose with one another (e.g., small round tables in dining rooms in motherhouses expressive of a more feminist culture, but most of our people using these tables have the mind-set of the essentialist

culture in which hierarchical structures may be very much alive.) Each of these cultures has a distinct and internally coherent pattern of belief and meaning—of leadership and community for example—and each culture has tools for advancing and validating that meaning. Each has its theology, spirituality, prayer forms, rituals and language that is expressive of its world view, its values, etc.

Amidst this amalgam of practices and beliefs is a strong emotional investment. I cannot emphasize this aspect enough, for it is this emotional field that ensnares many of our rational endeavours in community.

Here is the challenge for all of us: we must not domesticate our differences; we ought not to control our differences through subtle accommodating behavior. Because it is so subtle, there is need for us to unmask any accommodating behavior that is an insidious form of disrespect for the “variety of gifts” among us.

Here we are dealing with our deep-down “gut” reactions where cultural attitudes and the stereotyping that reinforce prejudices are played out. Sociologists, who understand these matters, tell us that prejudices are not just made up of stereotypes; they are stereotypes motivated by strong, and often powerful, feeling impulses. The feeling aspect forces the prejudiced person to see only what he or she wants to see, even to see things that are not there at all. It is at this gut level where the attitudes of resistance and hostility can hold sway or where acceptance and respect of otherness and differences can develop, and conversion and transformation can take place.

These varying cultural patterns of understanding and affect help religious to interpret their reality differently and provide distinct models for acting in the world. For example, the rituals of community life that support one set of religious beliefs are not easily translated into the rituals of another group. Any community member who frames an initiative in the language and ritual of one or the other culture runs the risk of alienating other groups who do not understand the message or do not find the initiative helpful in the development of their own spiritual journeys. For example, if I were

to use essentialist language (such as order, perfection, seniority, superior) to describe needed change in my community, I run the risk of alienating a large segment of my congregation who no longer think, act, feel or behave according to the logic of that language. At the same time, if I never frame my thought in essentialist terms, I could foster the impression among my sisters that their interests are being ignored and their needs overlooked.

According to Couterier, people experience a sense of unfair treatment when important rituals are minimized, religious beliefs are trivialized, and the emotions that surround religious experiences are ridiculed. An essentialist who has found God in the rituals of order, status, and self discipline ought not to be ridiculed by those who presume to have a more modern expression of religious life. At the same time, religious from the existentialist culture who have found God within the sometimes chaotic and messy world of dialogue, personal autonomy, and adult intimacies, ought not to be dismissed simply because their experience is unlike our own. The perception of unfair treatment may be rooted much more than we realize in the inconsistent values and the diverse patterns of assumptions, beliefs, affect, and ritual (behavior) of these varying cultures in our communities. Couterier is clear that if we do not recognize how powerful and distinct these patterns are, we will perpetuate misunderstanding, encourage the perception of unfair treatment, and miss a valuable opportunity to understand the group’s underlying challenges.

Let’s not domesticate our differences

While this diversity of cultures within religious life gives it a richness of perspective, it also creates the potential for serious misunderstanding about priorities, initiatives, and beliefs central to a shared religious life. And here is the challenge for all of us: *we must not domesticate our differences; we ought not to control our differences through subtle accommodating behavior.* Because it is so subtle, there is need for us to unmask any accommodating behavior that is an insidious form of disrespect for the “variety of gifts” among us and for our God “working in all sorts of different ways in different people.”

“Spirituality,” Jon Sobrino reminds us, “must begin with ... an act of profound honesty about the real, the recognition of things as they actually are.” We must start where we find ourselves, which often enough means recognizing how complex is the whole business

of having our consciousness raised and becoming changed in the process. Encountering diversity is simply too difficult to be sustained by our social impulses. It can be sustained only if we remain centered in God. As I say this, I'm reminded of a Chapter experience at which we, as Sisters of Mercy, struggled to come to an understanding of ourselves in relationship. Coming as we did from a variety of understandings and expectations of religious life, ecclesiologies, spiritualities, rituals and prayer forms, it was not always easy to hold a sense of connection. Again and again I would have this sense of ourselves engaged in a relational struggle, much like Jacob who wrestled with the "stranger" in his sleep. I remember one particular moment when differences were particularly overwhelming. Out of nowhere came the tiny voice of a memory. "Hold the center," it kept saying. It was the memory of something I had read:

In a world of chaos, change and conflict, there is a still point, a point of balance...only if we hold the center. "Holding the center" is not a matter of a bland spiritual homogeneity. It is commitment to speaking with those who are different with uncompromised respect and love. "Holding the center" means seeing the spark of grace that connects us all, beyond all differences and in the midst of all strife. Love and grace are at the center. When I hold to them, a truthfulness emerges that is greater than me or the other, yet binds us together.

If you recall, in the scripture story, when Jacob awakens, he comes to the realization that "God is in this place." "Revelation," Kathleen Norris tells us, "is not explanation, and it is not acquired through reading John Climacus, or anyone else. It is the revealing of the presence of God." Here was God's spirit inviting us to reach out and lay claim to our essential connection with one another, to risk entering into the shared journey of honest, reverent, patient dialogue and listening to each other in order to release the power of truth within each one of us.

We must live our truths

Just so, I believe that in our contemporary situation, God's spirit beckons powerfully for us to speak our truth to one another. We must live out our truths, testing our own truth against the truth received by the other, all the while believing and trusting that God will indeed work a greater truth in all of us than can be worked in any one of us standing alone. I sense that there is no witness more urgent for our day than for us

to refuse to follow the spiritual/religious individualism of our times.

Perhaps there is a deeper challenge for you as vocation ministers. As I see it, the challenge for you is to recognize and act out of the belief that cultures and the differences in cultures can also be the place of God's revelation and grace. It is truly my belief that it is at the level of culture that the issues facing religious life today need especially to be dealt with. For culture is the place, the staging ground for the crucially spiritual issues of power and love, of generosity and selfishness, of violence and compassion. It is what makes you feel like a stranger when you are not at home. It is the place where, I believe, God is dying to break through with his, sometimes her, transforming power.

As you assist others to discern their life vocation, you must take culture seriously. When one culture seriously and respectfully encounters another, the assumptions and certainties of both are challenged. What is God teaching us when one culture meets another? When one worldview of religious life encounters another? What do we have to learn about the healing of our modern pluralistic world? What do we have to learn about justice—which is all about right relationships?

As you weave your way through different values, beliefs, frames of reference, criteria of judgment, orientations, theologies, spiritualities, and so forth, pray for the grace to learn how to entrust yourself into the depth of everything and at the same time dwell on the borders of the ambiguities and uncertainties of situations, relationships, experiences. Some wise person is known to have said that on the borders is where one finds truth; at either side of the border, in this world or the next, there may be certainties and doctrines, but not truths. So I entreat you to go into the tensions and gaps that exist in your communities. Pray for the grace to linger at the borders where truth is moving, no matter how painful or dangerous to yourself.

Discerning a life vocation is about truth—finding it, claiming it, and telling it with our lives. When we are faithful to this journey, Hope, that unrivalled dimension of the soul which gives us the strength to continually try new things and to invest in God's future, will come with the dawn. ✚

Welcoming “the other” in our midst

by Rev. Virgilio Elizondo

Let's begin by looking at our own Christian identity. At its core is the mandate of Jesus, “Go forth and make disciples of all nations.” In the past, the glory of the church has been missionaries going out to strange lands, to learn foreign languages, get adjusted to new foods and customs and to bring the Word of God. Our mission magazines feature people going out into the jungles or slums of Africa or South America. And that has been very appealing to people; people are happy to give to the mission in far away places. And there is a great deal of good in that.

Nonetheless, it seems to me that if Jesus was here today, he probably would have said not only to go out and make disciples of nations, he probably would say, “Welcome all the people who come into your midst. That is not as exciting or as exotic. You might be very excited about funding your mission to go “out there,” but it might be very scary when people who are different want to play with your children or worship at your church or live in your convent.

I think our challenge today is the *welcome challenge*. The welcome challenge is to embrace the diversity in our midst, to welcome those who are rejected because of color, economic class, sexual orientation, or criminal record. These people are not out there; they are in our midst.

Cultural diversity is a reality; it's become a reality in Europe, and it's even more so here in the United States. It's a reality throughout the Western world. According to the last count I heard, Mass is celebrated in 72 different languages on any given Sunday in the Los Angeles area. The diversity is here. What are our choices? Are we going to have ghettos? Separate parishes, separate provinces? That approach served a purpose at a certain moment in American history, but I believe we need to recognize a new moment. The moment we are in right now calls for a welcome approach, welcoming the stranger in our midst.

Look at the model of Jesus. He was noted for breaking the rules in favor of people. He was noted for transgressing the most sacred taboos in favor of including the excluded. And not only including them but bringing something forth from that inclusion. At the core of Jesus's ministry was the joy of fellowship. He had such a good time with people that his enemies said he was a drunk and a glutton and a friend of public sinners. He was willing to break taboos, not just to break them but in favor of people. He ferreted out the truth of Scripture that every human being is created in the image and likeness of God, and if we don't see the beauty and divinity in a person, it's not because they're not there. It's because the world has been too blinded by sin to be able to see the truth of God. The truth of God is the dignity and worth, not only of each individual, but of human groups. We also believe that every human group is both contaminated with sin and blessed with grace.

God is calling the disadvantaged

And within that state of sin and grace, we must welcome others. We must go and seek them out, not just wait for them. Let's go out and invite people by name like Jesus did. There are people who feel they are unworthy, that they are undignified, they cannot make it. The call today is still for everyone, but especially for those whom Jesus called—the most disadvantaged of society. That is who Jesus drew from, and that is where we need to draw from today. So let's bring oth-

Rev. Virgilio Elizondo is founder and first president of the Mexican American Cultural Center (MACC) in San Antonio. He is currently the director of programming at Catholic Television of San Antonio and a professor at MACC and at University of Notre Dame. In addition, he is the author of many books and articles and lectures nationally and internationally.

ers within our midst and see them not as problems but as blessings.

Within the Latino tradition, we have a custom that illuminates this notion of the “problem” that becomes a blessing. The Posadas are a ritual game that takes place before Christmas. We go from house to house asking for shelter just as Joseph and Mary did. At each house we are rejected, we’re told to get out of there, we’ll beat you up, we’ll call the cops on you. Finally a house receives Jesus and Mary, and the whole atmos-

First is conversion of the heart and mind. We must take on an attitude of neutrality about difference, not seeing it as a threat or something to fear. We must see otherness as a gift of God.

phere changes. There’s great festivity, great singing and fiesta. But the marvelous thing about the Posadas is not the homeless who rejoice when they find shelter, but the joy in the home that receives the homeless. In receiving the two wanderers, this home receives the very self of God. This home dwells in the joy of receiving God into its midst. So let’s take the Posadas message to heart and see the people society sees as a problem and view them as vessels of God.

If our communities are going to receive the people on the margins, people who are different from us, how will we do that? There is no exact answer. We begin in prayer, profound prayer, for the Spirit to lead us toward creativity and boldness. Second is conversion. Each one of us needs to undergo a conversion of the heart and mind. All of us are so used to thinking that our ways are the correct ways. For me, I presuppose that the *abrazo* (hug) is natural for everyone. But when I was in Asia, I really had to learn to keep my distance and to know that I must bow differently according to the dignity of the person I was greeting. I had to undergo a conversion of heart of learn this new way of being.

So first is conversion of the heart and mind. We must take on an attitude of neutrality about difference, not seeing it as a threat or something to fear. We must see otherness as a gift of God. I’m going to be excited about discovering the beauty of an-other. Father

John Linskens worked in many parts of the world. When he left Holland and went to the Philippines, he was extremely judgmental. He constantly kept judging, “Why do the Filipinos have to be so backward? Why do they have to do things this way or that way?” Gradually, he started to see the wisdom in what they were doing. He discovered that they weren’t really so backward; it wasn’t really so bad to live in the Philippines. The same thing happened in the next country and the next. He said, “Each time I looked back, I realized that I had to die a little to my Dutch-ness, but each time I did, I became no less of a Dutchman, but I became much more of a human being.” That, my friends, is the paschal mystery. We learn to die a little to the idols within us, even though we might not recognize them as idols. We become no less who we are, but we do become more human.

Enter into their stories

I have some practical pointers on how we do this welcoming of others. First, *give yourself time to enter into the stories of others*. Nothing helps us appreciate others more than to enter into their stories. We learn so much from the stories people tell; they put us in communion with them. So take the time to listen to the stories of others. Reclaim your own stories. This kind of sharing teaches us so much.

Pay attention to language

Secondly, *be mindful of how very, very emotionally deep language is*. When you make an effort to learn my language, that tells me how really important I am to you. One of the things that has fascinated the world about Pope John Paul II is his ability to address people in their language. They say he is the first foreign dignitary that ever addressed the Japanese people in Japanese. He doesn’t know Japanese, but he learned how to read it. They write it for him in Latin letters, and he reads aloud in Japanese.

Let me tell you a story about the power of language. In San Antonio we’re a tri-ethnic town—Polish, Mexican and German. I decided to learn some Polish, and I mastered a few phrases, including the Hail Mary. I was making hospital visits one day, and I stopped to visit this gentleman. I remember him perfectly; he had white hair, very white skin, deep blue eyes. I talked with him and got nothing back. No response. No response whatsoever. He was alive and awake, but no response. His blue eyes were like two daggers ready to kill me. So I left the room frustrated and ran into his daughter. “Oh

Father,” she says, “I’m so glad you’re visiting my father.”

“It didn’t do much good,” I told her. “He wouldn’t say a word.” “Well, Father,” she says, “there are two reasons. First, my father became very angry at the Catholic Church because the only time they would send a Polish-speaking priest was when they needed to get money from us. Otherwise the Polish were not served in this area. The second reason my father wouldn’t speak to you is that because of that, he hates priests.”

Well, that’s actually a good reason for not speaking. So I said, “Let’s try again.” I went in and I used my couple of phrases in Polish, spoken of course with a Mexican accent. He started talking and smiling and I would shake my head, “Dopsha” or nod my head, “Dopsha,” and at the end I said the Hail Mary and made the sign of the cross, said, “God bless you” and left.

The next morning I was visiting some friends and they told me, “The doctors are amazed at the recovery of Mr. Nowak. He was so excited about having a Polish speaking priest here that he’s recovering his health.” Well, the recovery was brief, as he had terminal cancer, but from then on when I went in, it was the same thing every day, “How are you?” Yes, no, yes, no, Hail Mary, God bless you. At the end of his life, his daughter told me he wanted to make a confession in the church. It was beautiful. Of course since the whole thing was in Polish, it’s surely a confession that I can never reveal! This man understood the effort. It wasn’t just talk going on between us. There is an emotional power to language.

So use language in the songs, include it in the greetings, recognize that language is important to others, and make it important to you.

Decorations count

Another aspect of creating a welcoming atmosphere is to *be mindful of decorations*. These can create an atmosphere that will make people feel welcome and at home. At the cathedral in San Antonio where I’m pastor, we have a lot of Mexicans. I wanted them to really feel at home, so I asked them what would make them feel that way. They told me their favorite devotion was to the Black Christ of Esquipulas. So we arranged to have a Black Christ of Esquipulas crucifix made, and immediately the Mexican people loved it. You can go by and see hundreds of pictures and notes around it.

The people have a deep devotion to it. Tourists come by and ask, can I leave a picture of my son here? Sure, absolutely—anybody can. It’s amazing the power of that. So people are at home now.

It didn’t matter that the new crucifix was crucifix number five in the church. We already had a crucifix over here, and another one there, and liturgists might get a headache over adding this one, but the church is not for liturgists. It’s for the people. The Black Christ of Esquipulas is what brought them in and spoke to them and made them feel comfortable. It’s very important.

Can we take a look at people who don’t have a proper education? Who don’t come from a good background? Can we make a special effort to take them in? I think that’s one of the great challenges of today.

Music for the soul

How else do we make people feel welcome? *Music. It’s the language of the heart.* We enrich each other with our music. Some of the songs of the liturgy incorporate different languages for one song. We have some beautiful songs in English and Spanish, but why not push it and use Vietnamese or Korean? This is especially good with little children. They love to learn a couple of languages, as it comes to them easily. But use music of other cultures because it makes people of those cultures feel at home.

Multicultural feast days

Another way of welcoming people is *celebrating feast days by incorporating their traditions*. For instance, Latinos celebrate the feast of the Presentation by offering their babies during the Mass. There’s a special ritual whereby we bring our children to the altar to offer them to God; it’s a beautiful tradition. Pentecost is the perfect feast day to be inclusive in your liturgies. Maybe you have the Irish bring the linen, the French bring the wine, the Italians the bread, and another group sings. Then you have one liturgy because we’re all united in Christ.

Invite people on the margins

I want to return again to our great challenge today, which is to *invite at-risk people*, people who are suffering. A great strength of the Evangelicals is that they invite people who are suffering. I know a man who used to be a male prostitute selling crack to support his habit. One day his mother had a powerful experience of the Lord in an Evangelical church. So she dragged him along with her one Sunday. He did not want to go, and he didn't go willingly. But when he got there this Evangelical preacher looked at him and said, "The Lord is calling you to preach the Word of God." Well, that young man went from selling his body one Sunday to selling the Word of God the next Sunday. Because he was *invited*. Today he has a doctorate in theology from a famous theologate; he has a thriving congregation, and he's an incredible preacher. He preaches about what the Lord did for him.

Are we willing to take a chance on at-risk people? People with profound scars? Are we willing to reach people who have been hurt by society and healed in the Lord? Maybe that's one of the things that's miss-

ing in our church. Maybe we're taking people who haven't suffered that much. Christian mission comes out of suffering. We commit ourselves to work so that others don't have to suffer what we've endured. Can we take a look at people who don't have a proper education? Who don't come from a good background? Can we make a special effort to take them in? I think that's one of the great challenges we have.

We are in a privileged moment. At no time in history have so many diverse people dwelled together in the same space as in the U.S. today. This is an incredible phenomenon. God, who has brought us together, can take what could be the most awful chaos and turn it into a marvelous breakthrough. I'm convinced that your vocation as religious, your willingness to be daring and creative and Spirit-filled, can make you a great source of world peace. If you can bring diverse people together in your congregations, you can share that with American society, and you can share it with the world. Dare to dream the dreams that haven't yet been dreamt. Dare to imagine that which has never been imagined, and believe me, you'll be a great instrument in bringing forth the Kingdom of God. ✚

Diversity Prayer

Loving Creator God,
you call into life everything
beautiful and everything good.
Out of chaos and diversity,
you create harmony and community.
Out of many colors and hues, you bring forth rainbows.
Out of earth, wind, fire and water,
you call us into being.
We pray that you continue
to call forth ministers and disciples
from the many cultures
and communities that comprise
our Church today.
May our future religious sisters, brothers and priests
reflect the rich diversity
revealed in the Trinity
and present in our universe,
now and forever. Amen.

From NRVC Convocation 2002

Sexual diversity and contemporary U.S. religious life

by **Seán D. Sammon, FMS**

A middle-aged married couple, suffering through a bitterly cold Canadian winter, decided to seek relief by taking a short vacation in Florida. At the last minute, however, the wife learned about a hastily scheduled emergency meeting that her company had set up with one of her clients. Participating in it would delay her a day. On hearing this news and eager to escape the cold, her husband decided to go ahead of her with the promise that all would be ready for his wife's arrival later in the week.

On reaching the airport, the woman's husband discovered that his flight was overbooked. Neither his shouts nor threats of a lawsuit gained him a seat on the plane. With reluctance, he finally accepted the airline's offer of hotel accommodations for the night and a seat on the first flight out in the morning.

Stepping off the plane in Florida the next day, the man discovered that a heat wave was underway! Traveling to his hotel, he decided to change quickly and go to the beach. Before doing so, though, he sent his wife an E-mail to announce his safe arrival and to alert her to current weather conditions. In his haste to get to the beach, however, the man misaddressed his E-mail and, consequently, his message was misdirected to the home of the wife of a Protestant minister in Ohio whose husband had died just two days before.

Home for their father's funeral, this woman's children were assembled in the front room of the family's homestead. Excusing herself, their mother went into the office of her recently deceased husband to retrieve from the computer what all thought to be another message of condolence. Her children, therefore, were unprepared for their mother's ear piercing scream followed by a thud as she collapsed to the floor.

Running into the office, a few assisted the woman to a chair, while the rest read this text visible on the computer's monitor. "Beloved wife, arrived earlier today

after a delay of twenty-four hours. Yesterday, unfortunately, I was stopped at the gate. No amount of persuasion would gain me entry, and so I eventually accepted my fate. It has taken me an extra day to make my way here. Have confirmed your arrival tomorrow. And, believe me when I say that it is hotter than you will ever imagine in this place!!"

Our story confirms the importance of contexts. Without them, we run the risk of misreading the meaning of more than a few situations in life.

An example of what can happen in the absence of a proper frame of reference can be found in recent discussions about men and women religious who perpetrate child sexual abuse. The lack of a context that fostered dialogue gave rise to predictable results: misunderstanding, anger, and disillusionment among victims and their families, other lay men and women, and religious themselves. How would a context have helped? Consider this one: Adults who molest children take from them one of God's greatest gifts: trust. As women and men who minister in the Church, we have an obligation first and foremost, to victims of abuse.

Equally compelling is our responsibility to protect possible future victims. At the same time, those who minister with us in the Church need protection from guilt by association. They must be provided with the opportunity to continue their ministry free of suspi-

Seán Sammon, FMS is a Marist Brother who serves his community currently as General Superior. A past president of the Conference of Major Superiors of Men, he holds a doctorate in clinical psychology from Fordham University and is the author of numerous articles and several books, the most recent of which is Religious Life in America: A New Day Dawning (Alba House, 2002).

cion. Our proper role as Church leaders, then, is to join with parents and all others who are concerned about the problem of child abuse and to insure that children and young people are protected from sexual exploitation.

Sexual diversity and religious community

Today, though, I have been asked to speak about sexual diversity and religious community. In doing so, I

While individualism can be a problem, autonomy is not. Individualism causes people to put their own needs first. In contrast, those who are autonomous possess a strong sense of personal identity and are an asset to any community.

will first set a context for our discussion, and then examine three areas—identity and intimacy, the nature of religious life, and life in community. My presentation will conclude with a few final remarks.

Why concentrate on these three areas? Because our failure to place discussions about sexual diversity and community life within their proper context has caused many people to ask the wrong questions about sexual orientation and religious life.

Two points to keep in mind as we begin. First of all, the *religious* identity of a brother, sister, or priest must be his or her primary identity. His or her sexual identity, as important as it is in the life of any person, should not take precedence over his or her *religious* identity.

Second, there have always been, are now, and will be in the future, homosexually oriented men and women in religious life. Like so many of their heterosexual brothers and sisters, they live lives of celibate chastity with all the sacrifices and satisfactions involved.

Pluralism and religious life

In recent years, many of us have become more aware of the pluralism that exists in our religious institutes. This development is due, in part, to our growing realization about the many ways in which we, as citizens of the U.S., have excluded one or another group from full

participation in the various domains of public life. Racism, for example, exists in our society; it exists as well within religious institutes. Perhaps it is more subtle in its expression, but it is there none-the-less.

Similarly, a number of women religious, middle-aged and older, realize that until recently their experience as women was, largely, dismissed. Male experience was judged normative, and imposed upon women in the structures of their formation programs, their life together in community, and in the understanding of human sexuality and celibate chastity presented to them.

Finally, younger Catholics are not like those of us middle aged and older. Born after the close of Vatican Council II, they come today to our way of life with different ideas and outlooks. However, didn't we do the same thing during the 1960s? Are we willing to welcome them to our institutes, work with them, and integrate them fully? Diversity is not a problem for most of them; tolerance of differences is the norm they follow.

In the past, many expressions of diversity were dismissed as signs of individualism, and most of us can recall the admonitions given in formation against being singular. However, while individualism can be a problem, autonomy is not. Individualism causes people to put their own needs first. In contrast, those who are autonomous possess a strong sense of personal identity and are an asset to any community that has them as a member. Religious life today can only benefit from the presence of autonomous people, men and women who have a sense of who they are and what they hold dear.

Some implications of diversity

As men and women religious, then, we have discovered that diversity is an important element in the renewal of religious life. No need to be surprised. After all, individual differences and spirit of community can and have co-existed for a number of years now without too much difficulty.

Today, however, candidates for religious life come from a wider variety of ethnic groups than in the past, and bring with them a more varied experience of life prior to entering the process of formation. This increase in newfound diversity, and the tension that frequently results from it, has forced us to confront in a new way the relationship between each individual and the community.

Thankfully, most of us long ago gave up the mistaken notion that the process of formation would eventually render everyone the same within our institutes. However, this preoccupation lingers: will differences fragment us as a group? No idle misgiving. Witness the suspicion and backbiting that is so often the bitter fruit of any narcissistic celebration of differences.

The word *subculture* is used to describe a social group within a larger culture that has distinctive patterns of behavior and beliefs. Subcultures have always been present within religious life and, more often than not, they have enriched our life together rather than enfeebled it. For example, we have and continue to have within our institutes, intellectual subcultures, artistic subcultures, and even a subculture that ritualistically gathers weekly on Mondays for a “Church service” known as *Monday Night Football!* These subcultures enrich the life of any community; they bring together like-minded people while not excluding others.

A subculture within a religious institute that gives rise to undue dissension must question, though, its place within the larger group. One caution, however: we need to understand the origin of any subgroup before coming to the conclusion that it is divisive. In some religious institutes, for example, homosexually oriented men and women seek out one another for mutual support and understanding due to the hostility that exists in the larger group. In the face of such a situation, all involved need to be part of any discussion of the matter.

In discussing the admission of homosexually oriented candidates to religious life today, we also need to avoid the influence of the myths and stereotypes that surround homosexuality. For example, the fact that some priests and brothers who sexually molest minors become involved with adolescent males, ages 14 to 17, has caused some to suggest a relationship between homosexuality and pedophilia. The majority of mental health professionals would dispute this notion. To the best of anyone’s knowledge today, sexual orientation, be it heterosexual or homosexual, and child sexual abuse are not linked.

A homosexually oriented person’s suitability for religious life should not be based on his orientation but rather on his or her desire and ability to live a life of celibate chastity as well as the other usual criteria for admission.

We need not worry that greater diversity within our

congregations and institutes will force us to forego the more global communal traditions that are part of our identity as a group. Welcoming and accepting diversity should not stop us from celebrating those customs that have been passed down from previous generations.

Subcultures have always been present within religious life and, more often than not, they have enriched our life together rather than enfeebled it. A subculture within a religious institute that gives rise to undue dissension must question, though, its place within the larger group.

Identity and religious life

What do we mean by the word identity? On a personal level, it is that sense of knowing who I am and where I am going in life. Institutional identity is much the same. When asked what they stand for, groups with a strong identity have a ready and compelling answer to give. Just as personal identity helps distinguish you and me from one another and makes us unique, a religious institute’s identity helps its members answer these two questions: “Who are we?” and “What do we hold dear?”

Forming an identity is no easy task. In spite of that fact, it is a task that we are called to address many times over in life. The process of identity formation involves three steps. First of all, as an individual or as a group we must explore our options for living. And haven’t most of us been doing just that since Vatican II as we have tried to “read the signs of our times,” and, at the same time, “rediscover the charism of our founder or foundress?” The first step in any process of identity formation, then, is exploration.

Now, any one of us who has explored his or her options for living knows that crises are not far behind. And the greater the range of our exploration, the more intense will be the crises we experience. A simple example illustrates our point. You set out one morning from home to buy a shirt or blouse. Being rather practical by nature, you go to a store that sells

nothing but shirts and blouses. As you enter this establishment, you spy a shirt that is eye-catching and in keeping with your tastes. Its price, \$25.

However, as you take a close look at this shirt with one eye, out of the other you see on a nearby table a second shirt that is equally attractive and also the right size. Its price? Twenty-five dollars. You check your wallet: you have exactly \$25 to spend.

As you keep looking, let us say you identify 36 shirts, all equally attractive, everyone of them the right size, each costing \$25. You don't need me to tell you that, at this point, you have a crisis on your hands, a crisis of choice. And why is that so? Because, to complete the task that you set out to accomplish, at some point you are going to have to choose one shirt, part with your \$25, and leave the store.

In our personal lives and the lives of our institutes, this process is repeated time and again. The urgency that many of us experience today about religious life and its future has its roots in this process of identity formation. During every time of transition in life, you and I are called upon to reinvent our identity. Our religious institutes face the same challenge today.

Identity and intimacy

If identity has to do with self-definition, intimacy has to do with self-transcendence. Unfortunately, our contemporary society, more often than not, reduces intimacy to little more than genital sexuality. In contrast, James and Evelyn Whitehead frame their definition of intimacy as a question: "Am I sure enough of myself and confident enough of my ability that I can risk closeness with someone else?" The relationship between identity and intimacy is crystal clear in this definition: unless I am at home with myself as a person, closeness with others will frighten or overwhelm me.

Human sexuality entails a great deal more than genital behavior. It also has to do with how I experience myself as a man or woman, my understanding of my masculine and feminine dimensions, my feelings toward my body and the bodies of other people, and so much more.

Sexual awakenings

The term sexual awakening refers to very intense sexual feelings accompanied by genital desire and a

feeling of urgency. This experience most often gets underway during our adolescent years. For those among us who literally push our genital feelings out of awareness, a sexual awakening can occur later in life, during our late twenties, or at midlife. Regardless of when it occurs, the challenge of any sexual awakening is the same: to relate this new capacity to my capacity to love. Until that task is accomplished, I will experience anxiety and fear about my sexuality.

The process of working through my sexual awakening also teaches me an important lesson: the difference between having genital sexual feelings and acting on those very same feelings. Over time, I discover that I can control my behavior.

The challenge of any sexual awakening is the same: to relate this new capacity to my capacity to love. Until that task is accomplished, I will experience anxiety and fear about my sexuality.

Are there factors that can help you and me to be more at home with our human sexuality? As a matter of fact there are. First of all, we need to be realistic about human sexuality and not idealize it. The virtue of charity, for example, is as important as the virtue of chastity, and yet many of us can cite situations within our provinces of brothers and sisters not talking to one another for many months. This situation, though, is allowed to continue unchallenged. Let someone in that same community violate the virtue of chastity, however, and everyone weighs in with an opinion! Hopefully, the virtue of charity is as important as the virtue of chastity.

We also do well to see the deeper meaning of some sexual behaviors. For example, if a person finds himself or herself increasingly preoccupied sexually, or if the frequency of masturbation increases in his or her life, he or she would do well to take stock about what is happening in other areas of life. A behavior that appears sexual can often have a very different origin indeed.

Finally, we would all be better off to admit that we all

make mistakes in the area of human sexuality. More often than not, the majority of those mistakes have their origin in our fear of intimacy rather than in genital behavior.

Intimacy and celibate chastity

And what about the relationship between intimacy and celibate chastity? The latter is one way to live out my sexuality. To be at home with my choice for celibate chastity, however, I have to face—first and foremost—what it means to be a religious person.

With the passage of time, we also begin to realize that sexual and spiritual energy are more closely related than we first imagined. Both, we discover, have the same end: union with others and with God. These two passions of ours are friends, not foes. They draw us out of ourselves and into relationships.

If sexuality lies at the center of the spiritual life, the spiritual life is likewise at the heart of genuine celibate chaste living. As men and women religious, we can learn all there is to know about human sexuality, but if we fail to take on the identity of a religious person, we shall always be ill at ease with our celibate chastity. To be at home with our choice for celibate chastity, then, we have to face—first and foremost—what it means to be a religious person.

And what does that task require? To begin with, that we accept the fact that Jesus is the answer to the question that is every human life. Consequently, my relationship with him rests at the center of my life. And concretely that means putting aside time to nurture this relationship, and allowing Jesus to be himself. Healthy relationships foster the freedom of all involved. My relationship with Jesus should be no different.

We pay a price, however, when getting involved with Jesus on his terms. After all, he asks us to imitate him, not admire him. And that means embracing the Paschal Mystery. If we seek transformation, we must first learn to be at home with suffering and death.

An example

Jesuit Thomas Green uses the image of a well to illustrate this last point. He compares the consoling grace found in our relationship with Jesus to water bubbling to the surface of a well, almost to the point

of overflowing. Early in our relationship with the Lord, we are young and strong and can easily draw water from the well. We have available to us as much of God's consoling grace as we desire. But we are in charge, not Jesus.

With the passage of time, the water level in the well begins to drop. But we still have our strength, and so, with human effort, we continue to lower a bucket into the well and draw forth as much consoling grace as we like. But we remain in control. Jesus continues to be kept at a distance.

Sexual and spiritual energy are more closely related than we first imagined. Both, we discover, have the same end: union with others and with God. These two passions of ours are friends, not foes. They draw us out of ourselves and into relationships.

Eventually, however, that well, once brimming with water, dries up. And no longer young and strong, we lack the self-sufficiency of our earlier years. So, we ask ourselves: what can we do now to gain the consoling grace of God? An honest response: nothing, except to sit and wait for the rain.

When we arrive at this point in our spiritual life, we are better able to allow Jesus to be at least an equal partner in our relationship. We give him the freedom to love us as he sees fit. And how do we know that we are moving in this direction? When, like Teresa, we long only for a simple presence before God. Nothing more, and nothing less.

The second characteristic of a religious person builds upon the first: we accept the fact that Jesus loves us in a singular and special way. From the beginning of time, God has reached out to us in relationship, with Jesus being the most stunning example of that initiative. Every friendship that we have in life develops in a distinct and unrepeatable manner. So, too, our relationship with Jesus and its pattern of development are unique. They cannot be duplicated. Everyone's spirituality must be tailor-made to reflect these realities.

The identity of religious life

Since Vatican II, many of us have worked hard to assure fellow church members that our way of life is no better than any other approach to living out the gospel. And rightly so. However, in letting people know that we are just like everyone else, many of us have failed to address another equally important issue: what is it about our life that makes it unique?

Most theological and spiritual writers, in the years prior to the Council, answered that question by pointing to the vows of poverty, obedience, and chastity. The evangelical counsels, they said, are the

A spirit of reconciliation must be at the heart of the everyday life of any religious community that claims to have moved from darkness toward the light.

sum and purpose of religious life. But since Vatican II, our Church has emphasized the notion of *consecration* over the vows. Consecrated life is described as a call to imitate Jesus and his values more closely. Jesuit Marcello Azevedo puts it this way: the distinct character of religious life is the public profession by its members to live fully and radically the gospel plan as the object of their life.

Those of us who agree with this definition favor placing the word *consecration* at the heart of any renewed understanding of our way of life. Those among us who associate the term with the idea of setting someone or something apart for a sacred purpose, take exception to its use. But those in favor of using the word consecration argue that, by giving prominence to God's action, the term helps all of us avoid the temptation to see religious life as the creation and achievement of human beings. Instead, religious profession comes to be seen as the person's loving response to God's initiative.

Throughout history, those who have followed Jesus in religious life have delivered his message about God's reign and its imminence in a number of different and novel ways. Today our task is much the same. But that fact should hardly surprise us. After all, as religious

aren't we charged with responsibility for telling the story of God's deeds by means of personal example and in a language that is easily understood?

Contemporary community life

Now for the third area that has a bearing on our topic. Many men and women today are eager to invite young people to join our way of life, but are hard pressed to find communities in which they can live. This dilemma has given rise to a number of questions, including the following: what constitutes a healthy religious community today?

To answer that question we must begin with this given: every religious community is flawed in one way or another. That observation should come as no surprise. You and I are not perfect, and neither are those with whom we live. And neither is any human community. Different perceptions about the nature of community life, the day-to-day disagreements that occur in the lives of all of us, and, at times, the failure of those with whom I live to meet my expectations can lead to disappointments and hurt feelings. As a consequence, a spirit of reconciliation must be at the heart of the everyday life of any religious community that claims to have moved from darkness toward the light.

For too many of us, mere mention of the word community gives rise to an entirely different set of responses. We often find ourselves defensive, resistant, and silent. We know well, for example, some very rational reasons for living outside the communities of our province or congregation. Some of us maintain that community doesn't necessarily mean life together under the same roof, and point to our colleagues at work, or our family, or a circle of friends as our source of support. And there are many other reasons offered for not living together in community.

With all this bad news, we must wonder: is there a value today in community living? Of course there is! However, if truth be told, most of us are ambivalent about facing life together. Yes, you and I want the support, the care, and the affirmation that can be found in the common life. At the same time, we are often reluctant to change familiar and long-standing behavior patterns or to allow our group some claim over our time, talents, and resources. Let's also admit that it is easy to point to many aspects of community life that are unattractive. How much more difficult, though, for us to acknowledge that being called

together by God is what transforms our life in community into a moment of grace.

Qualities found in a healthy religious community

Today many young people have an interest in the radical possibility of adults living together in community so as to witness to reconciliation and peace. Isn't that also what a religious community is meant to be? A group of adults who have come together to live fully and radically the gospel plan as the object of their lives. What does that definition imply? That every religious community is, first and foremost, a **center of spirituality and prayer**. A good initial impression and lingering memory of any visitor to one of our communities should always be that he or she has been among people who pray.

What makes prayer so important in the life of a religious community? One, it has a way of transforming us. If we pray, we are better able to practice patience, withhold judgment, and love generously—some of the very qualities that foster a spirit of reconciliation. Two, prayer transforms our way of seeing reality, leaving us simpler, more humble and compassionate. All these qualities are great gifts to the life of any religious community.

Second, while a religious congregation is not a family, our family comes along with us when we join one. All that its members taught us about self-esteem, communication, faith and spirituality, relationships, and a number of other areas accompanies us to the novitiate, and to every subsequent community in which we live. In leaving our families to set out in life, most of us take with us some rudimentary tools we need for independent living. At the same time, we begin to realize that we are ill equipped for many of the challenges that lie ahead. For those who come to religious life, the formation process is meant to help remedy that situation. Until very recently, however, initial formation, though it prepared us for a great deal, did very little to provide us with the necessary skills for life together in community. What are some of those skills? An **ability to disagree, to comfortably give and receive affection, to speak honestly, and to extend and accept forgiveness more readily**. Training in these and other competencies needed for interpersonal living merit a central place in any contemporary program of religious formation.

Third, when it comes to life in a religious community,

a sense of humor is a great help. Some of us take ourselves all too seriously; we lack an ability to laugh at ourselves. How do we expect to get through life's rough spots?

Fourth, "**active concern**" toward other community members—taking the initiative and not just reacting to what others do—goes a long way toward building bonds within any group of which I am a member.

A good initial impression and lingering memory of any visitor to one of our communities should always be that he or she has been among people who pray.

Fifth, **the presence of several "little virtues"** among the members of any religious community goes a long way toward enhancing the group's quality of life. And what are some of those "little virtues?" Answering the door or telephone, providing a welcome to all who stop by, remembering birthdays and other special occasions, offering a word of thanks or congratulations, having an ability to celebrate, simply saying "hello" to those with whom I live.

Life-giving communities, then, do not magically spring into existence. We fool ourselves when we argue that responsibility for the community's quality of life can be passed along to others in the group. Each of us has an obligation to refresh daily our commitment to those with whom we live.

Finally, that **spirit of reconciliation** with which we began our discussion needs to be at the heart of any community that calls itself religious. From time to time, one or another of us learns of a situation where the enmity between two members of a religious congregation has caused them not to speak to each other for years. Others, having suffered some injustice at the hands of a superior in time past, choose to nurture their wound, keep their anger alive, and reject any notion of reconciliation. Eventually, they become so wed to their hurt that they lose any ability to embrace the future with freedom and hope.

Reconciliation is one important way of addressing our

hurt and anger. It entails a process wherein we *choose* not to let the hurt we have suffered get in the way of continuing our relationship, and *decide* to respond to whoever has hurt us rather than hold on to our pain. What was done is forgiven for the sake of who did it. While these decisions and choices are ours to make, cultural differences, lack of an adequate vocabulary for expressing emotional reactions, or a painful past history of managing conflict can make it more difficult for some of us to initiate the process of reconciliation. Not to do so, however, most often consigns us to the pain of our anger.

While forgiveness involves a choice and a decision, it also entails a process. Any hurt takes time to heal, trust

The primary identity of every sister, brother, and priest is his or her religious identity. All other identities must be secondary to that over-arching understanding of the self.

betrayed in a relationship is rebuilt only gradually. At times, therefore, we benefit from ritualizing the process of reconciliation. Through symbol and word, in an atmosphere of prayer, we admit that our relationships are fragile, and, despite that fact, recommit ourselves to the one that was breached. The healing that results from taking such action is not limited to the persons most directly involved, reconciliation is a grace for the entire community.

Forgiveness is also a two-edged sword. There are few situations of hurt in life where only one party is to blame. In revisiting my hurt, I must also admit that I contributed to it. Thus, genuine forgiveness robs me of my hurt. I can no longer use it against you.

Reconciliation, reminding us of our weakness, helps nurture in us a compassionate and loving heart. Such a heart is necessary if we are to be able to look on the face of any person in community and see that woman or man as our sister or brother.

Concluding remarks

To face the question of sexual diversity in religious life today, then, we must first clarify the nature of religious life. We can begin by reminding ourselves that the primary identity of every sister, brother, and priest is his or her religious identity. All other identities must be secondary to that over-arching understanding of the self.

Next, we can admit that the so-called vocation crisis that we face today in many parts of our world is, in fact, not a vocation crisis at all. Rather, it is a crisis of spirituality and significance. Do you and I have a passion for this way of living out the message of Jesus? Sad to say, what many of the members of our institutes are missing today is fire. Are we willing to do what has to be done to re-ignite that fire? Passion and fire have always attracted the young to religious life; they will do so once again.

Finally, in a very practical way, let us admit that we lack many skills necessary to help us talk about issues of diversity. We need to acquire them, and we need to do so without delay.

How blessed we are to live at this time in history, and in the history of our institutes. Our founders and foundresses were given the grace of establishing our congregations. We have been given the grace of founding them once again. And in so doing, there will be setbacks, and days of discouragement. At such times, it would do us well to remember these words of the prophet Habakkuk, words used by John Paul II, during his last visit to this country:

Remember, the vision still has its time,
and it presses on to fulfillment.
If it delays, wait for it,
for it will surely come. +