

Reception and Implementation of the Second Vatican Council Religious Institutes

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In the first half of the twentieth century a typical parish in a mid-European country such as Germany, Austria or Belgium, included a small house of religious sisters. Often there were no more than four or five sisters in such a house, and they cared for the church (i.e. sacristy and flowers, etc.), the kindergarten and the sick. Generations of parishioners passed through the hands of these sisters and received their initial education and religious socialisation from them. In 1953, there were 8,248 religious houses for sisters in Western Germany. Following the Second Vatican Council very few religious communities have been able to open new houses. On the contrary, within the course of a few decades an ageing process, which until then had not existed or been hidden, became obvious. A glance into Catholic papers today shows that reports on advanced jubilees of profession appear far more often than on vestiture ceremonies. The work of the diocesan commissions for religious is to a large extent dominated by the closure of houses.

Is it more than just a coincidence that the “turning point in the history of religious institutes”¹ is connected with the Second Vatican Council? Was the Council the cause and catalyst of the apparent decline of religious communities, or was it able to stop or slow a process that had already begun? I shall try to answer these questions in four steps.²

1 Haas, “Das II. Vatikanum als Wendepunkt der Ordensgeschichte”.

2 A description of the preparatory phase of the Second Vatican Council and the origin of the conciliar reform of religious life is based on the author’s habilitation thesis. It has an extensive reference to all relevant publications, so they are not referred to in detail in this paper. See Schmiedl, *Das Konzil und die Orden*; see also the subject survey in: Idem, “Rückkehr zum Ursprung und Anpassung ans Heute”.

Religious Institutes before the Second Vatican Council Between Climax and Crisis

At first glance, religious institutes³ experienced a boost in the years prior to the Second Vatican Council. The numbers of members grew substantially in the first decades of the twentieth century. The main growth took place in the institutes for women whose numbers worldwide grew between 1942 and 1956 from 538,708 to 730,434. In this period, all the religious communities could increase the numbers of their foundations. In some countries, such as Spain, there was a real boom in new members of religious houses.

However, this was only one side of the picture. After the Second World War, the situation in Europe changed and the growth curve declined. The signs of a crisis were clearly visible. The members of religious communities still had a leading voice in influencing public opinion, and they initiated innovative theological trends, but they were also more easily attacked by countermeasures. Theologians such as Henri de Lubac, SJ⁴, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, SJ⁵, Karl Rahner, SJ⁶, Yves Congar, OP⁷, and Marie-Dominique Chenu, OP⁸, stood for new emphases in theology, but both within their own communities as well as with the authorities in Rome, they found themselves under a cloud and were marginalised by disciplinary measures.

In the mainstream of religious life, however, they were atypical. Étienne Fouilloux has characterised the dominant mentality as that of a “fortress under siege.”⁹ As early as 1952, Lenten pastoral letters of the Belgian bishops described the reasons for the decline in vocations as “an increasing desire for unlimited freedom, a worldly atmosphere and a result of the opposition of

3 In what follows, ‘religious institutes’ includes all forms of consecrated life, that is, the traditional orders, as well as congregations, secular institutes and apostolic communities. In the words of a Vatican instruction: “Consecrated persons - monks and nuns, contemplatives, religious dedicated to the works of the apostolate, members of secular institutes and societies of apostolic life, hermits and consecrated virgins” (Kongregation für die Institute des geweihten Lebens, *Neubeginn in Christus*, no. 5).

4 Cf. de Lubac, *Meine Schriften im Rückblick*.

5 Cf. Ketterer, “Teilhard de Chardin”, which includes an extensive list of references.

6 On Karl Rahner and his influence on the Second Vatican Council, but also on its early life, see Wassilowsky, *Universales Heilssakrament Kirche*.

7 Cf. Congar, *Herbstgespräche*. On Congar’s role during the Council, see Melloni, *Yves Congar à Vatican II*.

8 On Chenu’s role during the opening phase of the Council, see his edited diary: Chenu, *Notes quotidiennes au Concile*.

9 Fouilloux, “Die vor-vorbereitende Phase” 86.

parents to the religious life," but also as "a new attitude to marriage."¹⁰ It indicated an outside view which was largely not shared by the majority of religious institutes at that time. In the 1950s, the dominant tendency was to stick to their guns rather than a readiness to renew themselves. Although, from time to time, these communities strongly emphasised their own conservatism and anti-modernist stance as an expression of zeal for their mission, there was a growing and increasingly vocal criticism of the omnipresence of the letter of the law, of the restrictions of the cloister that were particularly felt by the communities actively engaged in the apostolate, of the anachronistic forms of religious habits, of the repression of sexuality through an overemphasis on the value of virginity, of rigid ascetical practices, and the tendencies to close communities off from the world and create a ghetto.

The 'aggiornamento' of religious institutes, their adaptation to the challenges of the times, and the modernisation of their ways of life had to be initiated from above. Pius XII was greatly interested in this, because religious communities were among his closest collaborators, and because they occupied key positions in the Roman Curia. This explains the comprehensive reform of religious communities that took place between 1947 and 1958. Secular institutes were established as a new form of consecrated life.¹¹ It has probably not been fully grasped even today, what an inner readjustment this required of traditional communities, and the extent to which it cast doubt on their own identity. They were suddenly confronted with a way of life within the state of perfection that was lived outside the cloister, and that was accepted and recommended by the papacy. It became possible for communities of nuns to combine the apostolic and contemplative ways of living. Smaller communities were encouraged to link together to form a federation. The superiors of communities for men and women met on national and international levels to form conferences and commissions. The examination and acceptance of rules and constitutions formed an important part of their work. Special emphasis was placed on the education and further training of religious, in particular sisters. However, the underpinning theology of a consecrated life continued to take its bearings from principles that set the religious state over that of marriage. In his encyclical, *Sacra virginitas* (1954), Pius XII stressed that sexuality is not the main motivating force in human beings, and that marriage is not

10 Quoted in: Schmiedl, *Das Konzil und die Orden*, 95.

11 An indispensable source for the study of the history and theology of secular institutes remains: Pollak, *Der Aufbruch der Säkularinstitute*.

the best way to arrive at perfection. Young people should not be prevented from responding to a religious vocation.

Pope Pius' reform of religious life was unable to offer a positive answer to the question posed by communities as to their place in a changing world. It remained "a situational reform that helped to remedy some abuses, but was only able to do limited justice to the aim of modernising the Church and renewing theology from its sources."¹²

The period of preparation for the Council also did nothing towards answering this question. The main concern of the bishops was to regulate the relationship between religious communities and the dioceses in the sense of integrating them into the pastoral structures controlled by the bishops. Since they were responsible for diocesan communities of sisters, the bishops were deeply interested in reforming their outward appearance. Hence the future Council Fathers submitted a host of suggestions aimed at simplifying the habit, reducing privileges in the field of popular liturgy, as well as stipulations regarding the enclosure and regulations limiting the confessional practice of sisters. It is remarkable that the suggestions submitted by the bishops who belonged to religious communities, as well as the superiors of communities, remained as colourless as those of the other Council Fathers. Their wishes were concentrated on detailed suggestions and the apologetic defence of privileges of exemptions already granted.

This trend continued into the preparatory phase of the Council. The draft schema on religious life, comprising 132 pages, was painstakingly worked out by the preparatory commission. To a large extent, members of religious communities were personally involved in this work. The majority lived in Rome and were either the procurators of their communities or working at the papal universities. However, it was not a great success. This was partly because of the disastrous separation of the disciplinary from the theological sections (the Theological Commission laid claim to the latter) and also because of the perspective of Canon Law, which the members and consultors of the commission were unable to set aside. In 1961, Cardinal Suenens¹³ published his groundbreaking and challenging book on the crisis and renewal of communities for women¹⁴, but the twofold perspective he offered of 'crisis' and 'renewal' was not sufficiently adopted. "The signs of crisis were described,

12 Schmiedl, *Das Konzil und die Orden*, 150.

13 Cf. his autobiography: Suenens, *Souvenirs et espérances*.

14 Cf. Idem, *Krise und Erneuerung der Frauenorden*.

but the possibilities of renewal were only approached in a defensive and cautious way. Despite some beginnings (e.g. indications of the importance of the means of communication), the tendency of religious life to turn away from the world was strengthened."¹⁵ It is not surprising that against this background there was considerable criticism of the schema already in the first phase of examination within the central commission. However, it did not come to anything as there was too little time left before the opening of the Council.

The treatment of religious life in the preparatory phase of the Council corresponds almost exactly with the situation in the communities themselves. They moved between the feeling that they could continue as before with a few cosmetic changes, and an incipient awareness that a new era demanded other ways of life and action.

The Contribution of the Council to the Reform of Religious Communities

The Second Vatican Council also created a storm in dealing with the subject of religious communities. Until the third session, it was not clear whether it would even be debated by the Council Fathers as a whole. The way the Decree on Religious Life, *Perfectae caritatis*, came into existence serves as a model to explain the battles between the conservative and progressive forces at work among the Council Fathers. The one aimed at an exact codification of the way of life and the discipline of religious communities with a view towards their counteracting and healing of a secularised society. As part of the *ecclesia militans*, they should, in keeping with the teaching of Thomas Aquinas, represent the *status perfectionis acquirendae*, and in this way reflect the eschatological goal of the Church as a whole. The progressive camp of Council Fathers wanted to bring the mission of religious communities for the Church and world into sharper focus. As part of the Church they should, on the one hand, be a 'sign' of a future reality, while on the other hand, serving as effective helpers in the apostolic work of the diocese. These two fronts became even clearer in the course of the four sessions and their work can be seen in three main schemata:

- The Constitution on the Church, *Lumen gentium*, integrated religious communities into the new structure of ecclesiology as a specific state, but it com-

bined both the clerical and lay states comprehensively (LG 43), showing that both belong to the life and the holiness of the Church (LG 43). The Constitution departed from a mentality of privilege to the extent that it based the exemption of religious communities on the requirements of the Church and its usefulness for apostolic works (LG 45). However, the Council was unable to provide a definition of religious life. In retrospect this does not seem to be a shortcoming because it opened up possibilities for a multiplicity of ways of life to develop.

- The debate on the Decree on the Pastoral Office of Bishops, *Christus dominus*, dealt mainly with the problem of exemption. Both sides, the religious communities and the dioceses, wanted to strengthen their positions. The compromise arrived at concentration on the autonomy of religious communities in 'internal matters', while obliging them to acknowledge the final responsibility of the dioceses in the exercise of the apostolate.

- Finally, the Decree on the up-to-date Renewal of Religious Life, *Perfectae caritatis*¹⁶, bade farewell to the fiction that it was possible to command a revision from the centre. Instead the fundamental principles laid down gave sufficient room for a reform of the individual communities. Theologically, *Perfectae caritatis* continued in line with *Lumen gentium* and stressed that the ultimate goal of religious life is perfection in love. The individual types of religious communities were characterised briefly, and reference was made to the fact that the evangelical counsels are oriented to the example of Christ. Important directives were given through the emphasis laid on the education and continued training of members, the inculturation of religious life in the missionary territories, and the express demand that communities should collaborate, amalgamate and form working commissions and councils.

As a document on the way, *Perfectae caritatis* can be indicated with reference to women religious. It is one of the scandals of the Council that, except for a hasty survey of some superior generals of women's communities in the time between the third and fourth sessions, no women religious were involved in drawing up the decree, which, to a great extent, applied to them. However, at the end of the Council there was neither the necessary sensitivity nor the awareness of the problem caused by a changed insight into the role of the sexes and the theological evaluation of the role of men and women. This would had to have found expression in a corresponding use of language

16 Cf. Schmiedl, "Theologischer Kommentar zum Dekret über die zeitgemäße Erneuerung des Ordenslebens *Perfectae caritatis*".

and in the *modus operandi* of working out the documents together in partnership.

The subject of religious communities did not take up much time in the work of the Council. Most of the work was carried out in the commissions concerned. It was characterised by a debate between two diametrically opposing trends in the religious involved. One trend is identified with the longstanding secretary of the Commission for Religious, the Canadian Oblate Father Joseph Rousseau, an outstanding procurator and representative of a centralistic and controlling position aimed at leaving the competence for renewal exclusively with the authorities in Rome. Another supporter of this position was the secretary of the Faith Commission, the Dutch Jesuit, Father Sebastian Tromp. He was the main protagonist of Pope Pius XII's ecclesiology and a close collaborator of Cardinal Alfredo Ottaviani in the Holy Office.

On the other side we find religious such as the French Dominican, Yves Congar, who was sent overseas on three occasions between 1946 and 1956, and who had to give up his professorship. However, at the Council he was one of the most influential theologians. His aim was that renewal should take place out of the spirit of the origins and the sources of the early Church. The German religious collaborated closely with Congar and other theologians from religious communities, such as Henri de Lubac, SJ, and Edward Schillebeeckx, OP, and many others. The publications of Karl Rahner, SJ, for example, had been subjected to censorship by Rome even as late as 1962. During the Council he and his Jesuit confreres, Otto Semmelroth, Alois Grillmeier and Friedrich Wulf¹⁷, were the advisors to Cardinal Doepfner.¹⁸ It is to his committed and uncompromising intervention that we owe the fact that the schema on religious life even came into existence.

The constellation of theologians mirrored to some extent the two fronts that existed within religious communities. So it is doubtful whether a different or better result for the communities was possible at the Council. However, the theological debate shows clearly that both positions were represented at the Council: a conservative approach oriented towards tradition, and one that was more open to the world and ready for change.

17 On the influence of Friedrich Wulf on the subject of religious communities during the Second Vatican Council and his position in the history of spiritualities in the twentieth century, see Schulte, *Aufbruch aus der Mitte*; Idem, "Friedrich Wulf SJ".

18 Cf. the first biography on Julius Doepfner: Wittstadt, *Julius Kardinal Döpfner*.

The Reception of the Reform of Religious Communities Initiated by the Council

The reform of religious communities that was inspired and required by the Council was very widespread in the years following the Council. The most important aid in putting the reforms demanded by the Council into practice was the special chapter which each community was required to hold. Paul VI published the practical norms for these chapters in his apostolic letter, *Ecclesiae sanctae*, of 6 August 1966. The General Chapter played an important role both in drawing up legislation and in providing spiritual and apostolic revitalisation. All members were called upon to cooperate, which was facilitated by a particularly wide-ranging consultation. A special General Chapter had to be convoked within two or three years, possibly divided into two sessions, and it was empowered to modify the constitutions and introduce experiments. The final approbation of the constitutions was reserved to the competent authority. Cloistered nuns could also hold a chapter, but they were obliged to do this under the direction of a delegate from the Holy See.

The revision of the constitutions had to take into account the following elements: the biblical and theological foundations for the religious life were to be seen in connection with the spirit of the founder; the juridical section should have defined the character, the goals and the means required to carry them out. It was important to combine the spiritual and the juridical elements. Whatever was unnecessary was to be excluded, and everything else adapted to the physical and psychological requirements of the members and the times.

These special General Chapters were conducted between 1967 and 1971 in line with the given directives. The individual members were fully involved. Individual aspects of these Chapters were:

- A new departure was the requirement to reflect on the *charism of the founder or foundress*.¹⁹ The Council's demand that communities should "return to the sources of every Christian life and to the spirit of the origins of the individual institutes" (*Perfectae caritatis* 2) was used by many communities as an incentive to expose themselves for the first time to the inspirations provided by their history, and (without internal censorship) to study the writings of their founder or foundress. The communities rediscovered their spiritual fathers and mothers, whose lives also symbolically reflected the challenges of

our present times. This orientation to their origins resulted in practical consequences which the Redemptorists formulated in an exemplary way with regard to their relationship to Alphonse of Liguori: to study his life, to read his works perseveringly, to be imbued with his zeal and to identify with his attitudes.

- Necessarily, it followed that the *form of the rule or constitutions* had also to change. Many communities had first to break open a tough shell before they were able to discover the unique character of their institute behind the predominantly juridical directives. In this way the Premonstratensians became aware of the character of their Augustinian Rule as "a new reflection out of the spirit of the imitation of Christ". In their new constitutions "the spiritual basis of the Order was brought into line with the norm of the Gospel". The Ursulines reorganised their constitutions according to subjects and started with the orientation of "the spirit and nature of our Institute" to the charisma of the foundress, Angela Merici. They placed the juridical regulations in the second part. This division into the theological foundation and juridical development was typical of the work done at the special chapters. As a result, in contrast to the legal situation before the Council which described the texts of the Bible, the Church Fathers, theologians and Councils as having no place in the constitutions, a completely new situation was created. In most instances this process was accepted by the institutes.

- An important area of reform was the *way of life* of an institute. Decisions were taken to simplify the religious habit. This was the most visible change that took place. At times the meaning of the change was not grasped and some members longed nostalgically for a return to the old 'romantic' habit. Prayer times were adapted to the needs of the apostolate and, more strongly than before, became the personal responsibility of the members. The reform tried to create a new balance between the inner life and the apostolate. Many communities of sisters regulated the possibility to pay visits, and discontinued the practice that a sister might only work outside the convent when accompanied by another sister.

- These changes in the way of life also affected the *apostolate*. Communities, which in the course of time had developed too strong an orientation to the monastic tradition, became aware of the relationship between and reciprocal enrichment of contemplation and apostolate. The integration of communities into the dioceses and their pastoral concept, although a painful process for many, was seen and accepted as a task. 'Inter-church service' and 'cooperation

with sections of the Church' became slogans which required a departure from ancient structures of power and organisations if they were to be applied in practice. For some communities the Council documents resulted in new tasks. During their Thirty-first General Congregation in 1966, the Jesuits consciously accepted the task Paul VI had placed before them to study and make contact with atheism. This gave rise to an ecumenical dimension in the formation, way of life and work of the members, which was formulated in clear and practical directives.

- In most communities there was a significant change in their *government*. Having entered into dialogue with one another during the preparations for the special chapters, the members developed a new appreciation for 'community' and 'sharing' as the foundation for religious life. Co-responsibility became very important. The practice of obedience entered into crisis and had to be rethought and re-evaluated. The Jesuits, for example, highlighted the value of each member's own efforts to arrive at a recognition of God's will for him, and the value of his co-responsibility. The principle of subsidiarity took on new meaning for the government of communities. A survey of 91 institutes in a variety of countries showed that with regard to the government of the institute, 75 had chosen to formulate a new text, while 16 had only added a few changes.

- With regard to *education and formation* the publication of *Renovationis causam* was an important event. Almost all the institutes which held their special chapters between 1969 and 1971 based their deliberations on this document from the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life. A revision of the novitiates, the introduction of juniorates for the professional, theological and spiritual education and formation of members during the time of temporary profession, and the regulations ensuring the ongoing formation of the perpetually professed were topics dealt with by all institutes.

The special chapters gave the individual communities an opportunity to change their inner and outer features in keeping with the directives of the Council. In the process, the latent signs of crisis, which had already been present before the Council, became obvious to all. The loss of members through their leaving the communities as well as the rapid decrease in the entry of new members became the visible signs of this crisis. Far more significant was the loss of meaning which the religious life underwent, and which was part of the global process of secularisation in the second half of the 1960s. The members of religious communities faced, in a special way, the

accelerating challenges of the modern times. The young people entering a community wanted to continue their already improved education also within the religious orders. They wanted to use the mass media without any restriction. They wanted to make use of their freedom, and urged their superiors to hand out a single house key for every member. The most striking change however was the loss of religious communities' exceptional position in theology. This led to an identity crisis which found expression in different ways of living according to the evangelical counsels. The Second Vatican Council's momentum of renewal could only be applied in life to a limited extent. Instead, the signs of crisis were all too evident. On the one hand, the Council had opened up the possibility to undertake a comprehensive reform, while on the other, the communities lacked secure boundaries as a result of the emphasis placed on the juridical approach to the religious life in the decades before the Council. This meant that reform had been possible to a limited extent, but its effects were more easily monitored and controlled. Seen from the point of view of the individual and the community, the time following the Council made excessive demands on them. Compared with previous crises of religious life in the course of history, this time it did not mean the dissolution of an order because of a new foundation with more practical goals and a way of life that was better adapted to circumstances in a certain part of the world. On the contrary, communities were faced with something completely new. It simultaneously affected all communities throughout the world with their very different histories and ways of life. Every community was drawn into the crisis. As a result, crisis and renewal took place together following the Council. The crisis determined the degree of renewal, and for its part the renewal intensified the crisis.

Has the Crisis of Modernisation been overcome?

In the last few years, the problems have intensified for most religious communities. 1968 usually stands for the student uprisings which gave rise to social unrest. Through the encyclical, *Humanae vitae*, and the synodal efforts in different countries, like the *Katholikentag* at Essen and the Dutch Pastoral Council, the incipient process within the Church of opening itself to the world did not pass by religious communities without leaving a trace. The increasing public presence of sexuality affected all persons who were known as not married. The crisis of celibacy and community crises to some extent became public property, although not all were as spectacular as the case of the Siegburg Benedictine Abbot, Alkuin Heising, who announced publicly that he was leaving the order. The end of a 'Catholic milieu' became

very evident in the fact that after they had left their communities, theologians did not give up their public activities, but rather increased them. Examples of this are the former Benedictine Thomas Sartory, or the former Dominicans Otto Hermann Pesch and Stephan Pfuertner. Conflicts within the Church or a community no longer resulted in someone being stigmatised or losing their influence.

As a result religious communities now have their backs to the wall. From a European perspective, this is shown in a rapid decline in the numbers of their members. From the perspective of the universal Church, however, there has been a displacement of the members to the young churches of Asia and Africa, and to a lesser extent, to Latin America. Between 1965 and 1991 the Salesians declined by 21,5%, the Franciscans by 27,3%, the Jesuits by 34%, and the Benedictines even by 56,9%.²⁰ Nevertheless, as a result of the increase in members in Africa and Asia, a number of newer communities have been able to maintain their numbers or even increase them. The two developments are clearly out of step, not just with regard to numbers, but also in the way the religious life is being lived.

There is an ever increasing lack of clarity what religious life is really about. People have often expressed regret because the Council shied away from providing a theological definition of religious life, while today it symbolises the search of Christian spirituality which has not come to a conclusion. The ancient theology of the religious state is no longer plausible. Other concepts have come to the fore: we are concerned with a mission in the midst of the world, with a new affinity to the world rather than flight from the world, with overcoming the world and penetrating the world. The subject that played a central role in the closing stages of the Council was very apposite, also in a theological sense, to religious life. In the German-speaking world this has influenced the writings of the Jesuit theologian, Friedrich Wulf, as well as the integrative approach of the "Ordens-Christen" in the works of Anneliese Herzig²¹ and the studies published by the *Arbeitsgruppe Ordenstheologie*.²² In the French-speaking world, mention must be made of the Canadian Dominican, Jean-Marie-Roger Tillard²³, and in Italy, Enzo Bianchi.²⁴ For the

20 Punsmann, "Zur Komplexität religiöser Orden heute", 147.

21 Herzig, *Ordens-Christen*.

22 Schapp and Kunz, eds, *Erneuerung oder Neugründung?*; Schambeck and Schapp, eds, *Lebensentscheidung*; Gruber and Kiechle, eds, *Gottesfreundschaft*.

23 Tillard, *Vertrauen zur Gemeinschaft*; Idem, *Frei sein in Gott*.

24 Bianchi, "Le monachisme au seuil de l'an 2000".

English-speaking world one may look at the works of Sandra Schneiders.²⁵ The new ways of life that have broken through, such as the secular institutes and above all the new spiritual movements²⁶, pose a particular challenge to the renewal of a theology of religious communities. Men and women religious have often received new inspiration for their own religious lives as a result of their cooperation with these new spiritual movements. However, before an unprejudiced and spontaneous collaboration is possible, both sides have to overcome their resentments.

The Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life in Rome continues to exercise an important function in guiding religious communities. Its task lies less in the disciplinary field, although the controversies surrounding the amalgamation of Latin American religious (CLAR) or the very different directions taken in the reform of the Carmelite family might suggest the opposite. The Congregation is far more concerned with accompanying the process of renewing religious institutes through issuing circular letters on definite subjects. In this regard mention must be made of the document *Religious and Human Advancement* published in January 1981, *Fraternal Life in Community* of 1994, and the instruction *Starting afresh from Christ - a renewed commitment to consecrated life in the third millennium*, given out at Pentecost 2002. The 1994 Bishops' Synod devoted to the consecrated life, and the document *Vita consecrata* that followed it, tended more to encourage than to demarcate. The change of perspective with regard to the biblical foundations for the consecrated life, which moved from emphasising renunciation and leaving everything behind to that of sharing in the fullness of Jesus' glory as it finds expression in the events on Mount Tabor, shows that that thinking has taken a new direction.

It should not surprise us that tensions appear along the way. Religious communities felt encouraged by the Council to overcome the dichotomy between their inner, spiritual lives and the demands of the apostolate and professions. A statement made in the document *Religious and Human Advancement* takes this up. Number 13 enlarges on four great loyalties: fidelity to humanity and to our times; fidelity to Christ and to the Gospel; fidelity to the Church and to its mission in the world; fidelity to religious life and to the charisma of one's institute. Yet sixteen years later, in the post-synodal document, *Vita consecrata*, another list is presented: faithful to Christ, the Church, to your institute and to the men and women of our time (*Vita*

25 Schneiders, *New Wineskins*; Idem, *Finding the Treasure*; Idem, *Selling All*.

26 Hegge, *Rezeption und Charisma*; Cordes, *Nicht immer das alte Lied*; Wolf, ed, *Lebensaufbrüche*.

consecrata 110).²⁷ It would seem that at the end of the second millennium the trend has gone into reverse. Religious should first of all be aware of their religious and ecclesiastical calling, and only from there foster their involvement with the world. It is true that religious are being strongly reminded of their role in the Church. Their involvement in the pastorate at a time when there is a scarcity of priests is not only desired, it is even required. In this regard, the debate on the limitation of exemptions has clearly borne fruit. On the other hand, the experiences gained in the course of the decades since the Council have shown clearly that the centrifugal forces at work in an active, apostolic life need to be continually counteracted. As a result, on 13 May 1999, the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life presented a document on the contemplative life of cloistered nuns, *Verbi sponsa*, in which cloistered nuns are described as the “soul and yeast of apostolic initiatives”, whose lives become “a mysterious source of apostolic fruitfulness and a blessing for the community of Christians and the whole world”.²⁸ This also applies to active communities. Although there was an enormous exodus from communities in the years immediately after the Council, individual communities still have to cope repeatedly with the departure of longstanding members. In this context, it is often pointed out that there has to be a balance between the different areas of life, and that every consecrated life needs to be continually re-focused on its centre and meaning.

The years following the Council have brought about a shift of emphasis in religious communities. Immediately after the Council, the main focus was on formation, that is, the first phase of belonging to a community. Today it is on ongoing formation. The study of theology has largely been transferred outside the individual community. After the Second World War there were thirty colleges run by religious communities in Germany, today only six colleges, of which five are full faculties of theology, are still in their hands. Yet the choices for ongoing human, spiritual and professional education and formation have grown enormously. The professionalisation of many fields of activity, the human preparation to make this possible, and its development through the different phases of life have become very important to religious communities and their members.

It is significant that these developments are no longer taking place within the individual communities. A new element has entered into Church history

27 Schermann, “Ordensleben”, 40. Reference is made to the commentary of Anneliese Herzig (*Ordenskorrespondenz*, 40 (1999), 152).

28 *Verbi sponsa*, No. 7.

through the solidarity of religious institutes. In Germany, for example, there is an Association of German Religious Superiors (Vereinigung Deutscher Ordensobern (VDO), founded in 1898)²⁹, an Association of Religious Superiors for Women's Communities in Germany (Vereinigung der Ordensoberinnen Deutschlands (VOD), founded in 1954)³⁰ and an Association of Religious Superiors for Orders and Congregations of Brothers (Vereinigung der Ordensobern der Bruederorden und -kongregationen (VOB), founded in 1958)³¹, as well as a Commission for Secular Institutes. Different commissions serve different fields, so that members working in the same field can meet regularly to exchange experiences. For example, there are commissions for religious working in high schools or schools, for religious working with youth, for bursars and procurators. The Institute of Orders (Institut der Orden) is responsible for coordinating the education and ongoing formation of members. Even in the financial field religious communities have become mutually dependent. In the Work of Solidarity (Solidarwerk) they have taken on the obligation to create their own system of pensions and caring for their older members, thus relieving the state. The Council's recommendations concerning the formation of conferences or councils of major superiors, because they "can contribute very much to achieve the purpose of each institute; to encourage more effective cooperation for the welfare of the Church; to ensure a more just distribution of ministers of the Gospel in a given area; and finally to conduct affairs of interest to all religious" (*Perfectae caritatis* 23) has taken a qualitative leap forward in the past decades. It is possible that this solidarity of religious communities is the most important result of the post-conciliar period and the best sign of the implementation of what was described in a theological synthesis of the Council as "Communio Theology"³²

The reception of the Second Vatican Council by religious institutes is somewhat ambivalent. The Council provided them with a means that would enable them to cope with their crisis to some extent. The fact that they reached the culmination of their expansion, while at the same time experiencing a crisis in the numbers of their members and vocations, naturally led, within the space of a few years, to a changed evaluation of themselves as well as by others. Many tasks they had taken on shortly before the Council had to be abandoned because of a lack of personnel. Others were a burden to the communi-

29 On the history of the VDO, see Leugers, *Interessenpolitik und Solidarität*; Idem, "Vereinigung Deutscher Ordensobern".

30 For the history of the VOD, see Vereinigung der Ordensoberinnen Deutschlands, ed, *Festschrift 25 Jahre VOD*.

31 For the history of the VOB, see VOB, *25 Jahre Vereinigung der Ordensobern*.

32 See a.o. Kasper, *Die Communio-Ekklesiologie*; Garijo-Guembe, "Communio-Ekklesiologie".

ties and prevented them from finding a creative solution. With regard to their way of life, the reform has to a large extent been a success. Problems have arisen mainly in communicating with others. Within the Church itself, religious communities have been subjected to a continual process of marginalisation. So it is fairly certain that not all communities will survive the transformation. The past decades have, however, shown one thing very clearly: religious communities are capable of transforming themselves and are in a position to offer an answer to the challenges of even the most difficult circumstances in an era. This will also secure for them a place in the landscape of the Church and society in the time to come.