

Religious Life : A Dialogue

by Sr. Cecily Boulding, O.P.

I should like to question strongly the assertion made in Fergus Kerr's article *Priorities in Religious Life* (October 1973), and repeated from the essay by Jerome Murphy O'Connor, that: 'What is distinctive about religious life is that religious consent to live according to the evangelical counsels, but *in community*. That is the difference'.

I would maintain that what is distinctive about religious life is that religious undertake to live in consecrated celibacy, and I think that the writer of the article referred to implies this when he says, in his third section: 'It is time, too, that there were religious communities to demonstrate that men and women can live together in consecrated celibacy,' alluding to the fact that the cradle of the Dominican Order, Prouille, was by St Dominic's legislation a double community (but there was a good deal more to *that story!*)

If community, if living together, why celibacy? Surely this is contrary to the idea of community taken in its most radical and absolute form, which is the ideal the writer seems to be advocating. If celibacy is still to be maintained and consecrated even in the most 'communitarian' situation, this must surely be because it is prior to the ideal of community, and of the essence of religious life?

I freely admit that, historically, this has not always been considered so. There have been cases, such as that of the Order of Knights Templar, where the Church accepted as an authentic religious vocation a way of life combined with the married state, and I would not wish to suggest that the life of married clergy is not a religious vocation; I submit, however, that consecrated celibacy has come to be the defining characteristic of 'religious life' as we understand it in our era, and that participation in a formal 'religious community' is secondary to this.

It is true that for most of us community life is necessary to support a life of celibacy, and that the 'lone religious', whether with private vows or no vows, has in practice become the exception, but I think that the way in which a vocation to consecrated celibacy demands and determines community living needs much closer examination than has been given to it. Consecrated celibacy surely means, primarily, a vertical, and unilateral, relationship with God, and only secondarily, a horizontal and more comprehensive relationship with other people. Or, if this seems too stark and exclusive a proposition, it means primarily a vertical and unilateral expression of the redeemed Christian's relationship with Christ, and only secondarily a horizontal expression of his relationship with other people. No doubt Vatican II theologians will contest this with the

quotation that: 'It has pleased God to save men and make them holy, not as individuals, but as members of a community'. True, but the only communities theologically imposed are the human race and the universal church. Voluntary membership of the more formal 'religious community' is not an inevitable concomitant of the decision to express our relationship with Christ in the more unambiguous way of consecrated celibacy. Since most of us (with the strong persuasion of Church authority in more recent centuries), do in fact choose to live out our consecrated celibacy in community, the purpose and function of community life should be analysed more explicitly in the light of this primary proposition, an analysis it does not seem to receive in the work of Jerome Murphy O'Connor or Fergus Kerr.

The remarks of the Vatican Council Documents on religious life, mainly to the effect that 'Chastity has stronger safeguards in a community where fraternal love flourishes', and similar considerations, while doubtless pointing in the right direction are clearly quite inadequate. It might be more satisfactory to admit frankly that we seek compensation in community for what we have given up by celibacy, and go on from there. If we have freely made a holocaust to God of the primary expression of human love and companionship in the belief that our direct relationship with Him is sufficient for us, how much support and companionship on the human level have we the right to expect that He will give back to us? Medically and psychologically (and spiritually?), most of us are just not capable of sustaining the celibate situation in its absolute form alone, and break down altogether without some human support; but is it the primary function of religious community to make possible an eschatological form of life only really appropriate in heaven where there will be no marrying or giving in marriage? I do not know. What about the 'lone religious' who does not live in community either from choice or from necessity of work (and I think the former must be considered as religious — pace, Fergus Kerr, and not even as merely quasi-religious), and whose life has neither the support, nor the witness value of community? What is the purpose of his vocation?

I do not wish to imply that what has been written about the value of community life in witnessing, tangibly and existentially, to the reconciling power of Christ in the world today, is not true in its own sphere, and very valuable and important. I do wish to suggest that even this is not the primary purpose for which most of us become religious. If it were, it would be a case of coming to do a particular job for the Church and the world—that of witnessing existentially rather than preaching verbally. The witness value should surely be the, almost accidental, by-product of the primary purpose of religious life, for Dominicans the 'aliis tradere' which follows from the 'contemplare'. Again I think that the author of the article under

consideration indicates this when he says: 'But the quality of the corporate witness to the reconciling power of the name of Christ must depend on the quality of each member's life', but he does not expand the point. The remark comes right at the end of the article, and thus seems to imply, as does its limited development which follows, that the order of priorities is: the quality of community life first, and then consideration of what this implies for the 'religious life' of the individual. The writer continues: 'This means that the witness value depends on its being a setting, and on its providing an ambience, in which people can reach that kind of reconciliation with each other and with God (sic—in *that* order!) which will then give its quality to whatever work individuals or the group may undertake'.

I would like to assert that the order of priorities in religious life indicated in the article is quite correct if they are considered as priorities number two and three, but that priority number one—Why celibacy?—has not received adequate attention and, moreover, that numbers two and three make little sense when not based on it.

Sr. M. Cecily Boulding, O.P.

Fergus Kerr writes:

Since my purpose was really only to argue for a certain priority in the practical order of the quality of community life over the form of apostolic work which religious undertake, it seems from her closing paragraph that Sr. Mary Cecily entirely agrees with me about this. I am of course perfectly open to her suggestion that there may be something else altogether—consecrated virginity perhaps, as she says—which is prior to both community and mission, and without which they would 'make little sense' (though I think that phrase is much too strong). I am not sure, however, that consecrated virginity is 'the defining characteristic of religious life as we understand it in our era'—as if belonging to a community were 'secondary to this'. It seems to me, on the contrary, that other people naturally think of us in collective terms—primarily as convents, monasteries and so on. Like a soldier or a gipsy, a religious seems to owe his identity to the group to which he belongs. And speaking now from the inside, surely very few of us find that we are called to celibacy and then look round for a group to join in order to seek compensation for what we have given up? Surely we are attracted in the first place to the ideal or the reality of some particular religious house or order, and we take on the vows as a natural and appropriate part of commitment to this whole form of life. Some of us will then be drawn by grace and nature to stress celibacy rather than (say) prayer or poverty or obedience or fraternity or apostolate, as we seek the axis around which to work out our particular vocation. The forms of religious

life are very various and I concede that my stress on community rather than work in the case of religious committed to both means that I have ignored the long history of religious who neither belong to any community nor do anything much that people would regard as work. But it is surely not celibacy but the desire for a life of prayer that draws people to the eremitic life and sustains them in it?

Where my view differs most from Sr. Mary Cecily's is perhaps that it seems to me that being a celibate consecrated to God is a way of being related to other people—not 'primarily a vertical and unilateral relationship with God and only secondarily a relationship with other people' but *simultaneously* a way of being dependent upon God and of being related to other people (just as being married is a way of being consecrated to God in being two in one flesh). I agree that the idea of fraternal love as (merely) a safeguard against unchastity is inadequate, though it certainly seems to me very true as far as it goes. I cannot believe that it is the only or even the main reason for the existence of religious communities. But the case for the priority of celibacy would be more persuasive, I think, if the picture of the celibate who does better without human love and companionship were replaced by what seems to me a much truer one—of the consecrated virgin like Catherine of Siena who clearly attracted and enjoyed the company of friends, not as compensation or as safeguard but out of that immense love of people which the love of God inspires.

Sr. Cecily replies:

The difference of fundamental premise remains: I think that consecrated virginity is the defining characteristic of religious life, both as seen from the outside, and from within. From the outside: 'She's a nun' is generally synonymous with 'one of those strange people who don't get married', (if not, more crudely: 'one of those odd people who don't believe in sex'), and I think this aspect comes to mind before that of membership of a group. From within: It does seem to me to be the case that the religious is primary conscious of the call to a more specifically defined relationship with God which resolves itself into a vocation to celibacy, and then he or she begins to look for the appropriate community or milieu in which this can be lived out.

Perhaps this difference of viewpoint is autobiographical—we inevitably tend to generalise our own particular approach; or is it a difference between the masculine and feminine approaches to religious and community life? While I agree with most of the content of the essay by Jerome Murphy O'Connor, one criticism I would make is that he seems unconscious that there is, or could be, a marked difference in the attitude and outlook of men and women on the subject.

I would suggest that the proposition: 'It is not celibacy but the desire for a life of prayer that draws people to the eremitical life' makes a false distinction; surely the implications of celibacy, and the desire for a life of prayer, are very closely linked: both are a form of close relationship with God, and a means to it.

I am not convinced that 'being a celibate consecrated to God is a way of being related to other people,' except in the—rejected—sense of being materially freer to work for them. I would entirely accept the proposition that the example of someone like St Catherine of Siena, who attracted and enjoyed friends, is a better illustration of what consecrated virginity should be, than that of the solitary, and I think her case admirably opens up the question I should like to see analysed. Her story includes the episode of three years solitary prayer in her own cell, which she only abandoned after a fairly sharp 'ticking-off' from God who pointed out to her that she could not remain alone on the mountain-top always, but must return to His people down on the plain. In other words, she felt, and presumably resolved, some tension between the two relationships, with God, and with other people. Obviously this is a tension which all feel sometimes on particular occasions, but it seems to me that it is also one which is radical to the whole concept of community religious life. Since such a tension is almost by definition 'built-in' to the concept, I would like to see it more fully examined. In other words, what is the vital connection between community life and celibacy or consecrated virginity? Clearly it is not an absolutely essential connection in view of many historical exceptions to the practice, but since the two have become so generally and normally associated in the Church, remarks about safeguards to chastity seem to me quite inadequate and totally negative.

Why do we join communities? Has it a real connection with our virginity? Actors, golfers, hippies join groups or unions to achieve some purpose external to themselves—or do they? Do they join such groups because of what they already are, or want to become? Does celibacy already determine the sort of person we are, or want to become, so that we find it necessary to join a group (as I would be inclined to maintain); or do we find that the communal life we are attracted by necessitates celibacy? Either way, it seems to me that the positive role of consecrated virginity as the expression of a particular relationship with God must be the primary consideration.

A closing comment from Fergus Kerr:

Perhaps Sr. Mary Cecily and I had better just agree to differ!—at least until such time as one or other of us feels up to attempting some deeper analysis of the connection between consecrated virginity and religious life. She should note, however, as Denis Keating should too, that the Murphy O'Connor essay that started this debate is the

product of days of discussion with women (Dominican Sisters), which surely makes it implausible that he would have been left as blind to the difference between men and women in their approaches to religious life as she declares. I would think that the vocation of each religious is such a personal amalgam of elements — is so 'autobiographical'—that celibacy might well preoccupy one person so much as to seem the very heart of religious life, whereas another person's vocation might have a different axis altogether.

It is clearly impossible to reply to Denis in a paragraph, even to explain my own line of thought far less to defend Jerome Murphy O'Connor. If the continuity of life and work so splendidly asserted in the Dominican documents he cites actually existed in practice there would of course be nothing for us to be debating. It is my experience —by no means only among Dominicans—that the determination to continue inherited apostolic commitments, or to embark upon fresh missionary projects, by filling round holes with square pegs under the cover of talk about the 'needs of the province', is the principal cause of the lamentable deterioration in the quality of community life—by which I don't mean that religious don't have enough of this 'affective life' that Denis is so suspicious of (clearly some of us need it more than others), but rather that over-worked religious find it increasingly difficult to worship decently together or even to practise personal prayer, and they find themselves becoming less and less effective at their work (and whatever Denis says it is in teaching and nursing that the vast majority of religious are engaged) and less and less able to give to or find in the apostolate any specifically religious dimension. No doubt there is a danger of swinging too far in the other direction, but it is a danger that is still very remote. Denis ends by suggesting that religious spend too much time talking among themselves—within the circle; does he really believe that? It seems to me just the opposite. That is surely the one indisputable conclusion to be drawn from the misunderstandings that have fuelled our exchange of views.