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CATHOLIC RELIGIOUS SISTERS - A DYING BREED?

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I have used the title “A dying breed” with a question mark because there are some people who say we Sisters are disappearing, being replaced, becoming irrelevant.

The phenomenon of ‘Religious Sisters’ has been a reality since the beginning of Christianity and will continue, but in what form we do not know. Firstly, women ministered as ‘virgins’ and ‘widows’ in the early church, serving the local communities in whatever was needed: nursing, caring for the poor and elderly, and so on. Then as societies changed, so their lifestyle changed with it.

There have been five major periods of change in the way of life of Catholic religious.ⁱ The first was the desert dwellers – those who went out to live alone to maintain a spirit of total commitment to God as a response to Christianity becoming the State religion. Religion was no longer a matter of personal commitment to Jesus Christ, but merely a means of membership in the Roman Empire. This period was roughly from the 2-5th Century.

The second change in direction was the move to form communities as the numbers in the deserts increased. These then became centres of life in Europe as villages and towns grew up around these monasteries. This period was from the 5th to the 12th century.

The end of this period saw the appearance of “Beguienes.” These were women mainly in the Netherlands who lived alone without taking vows, and devoted themselves to prayer and good works. If they had no income, they supported themselves by manual labour, or by teaching the children of villages. These women were very well aware of the spiritual and social needs of the age, and their lifestyle spread rapidly.

Some of these women later formed communities. Every community was complete in itself and fixed its own order of living, though later on many adopted the rule of the Third Order of Saint Francis. These then became centres of mysticism

They soon began to exercise a profound influence on the religious life of the people, as many became renowned for their wisdom: “It was not the monks, who mostly dwelt on the country side, nor even the secular clergy, but the Beguienes...and the sons of Saint Francis who moulded the thought of the urban population of the Netherlands...”ⁱⁱ Beguienes continued to exist, for “in 1856 there were about 1,600.”ⁱⁱⁱ

St Francis of Assisi (1182-1226) went to the ‘other extreme’ to that of the hierarchy of the Church of his day. The wealth, high position, political and military power, had corrupted many of these leaders, and Francis spoke out against this, not so much verbally, as by his way of life. St Clare of Assisi wanted to follow Francis, caring for the lepers and the poor, but convention would not permit a woman to go roaming around the countryside. Hence, she ended up in a convent, until she established convents of her own. Still, she maintained her spirit of openness and love of poverty in imitation of Christ. There are two major groups of her sisters today: the contemplatives – those who remain in their convents and sustain themselves through various works, and the other Sisters are mainly teachers.

Next there came groups which began following the Reformation. Many of these served the church by teaching and defending the papacy and its doctrines. (e.g., the Jesuits founded by Ignatius of Loyola 1556). Sadly, this ‘defence’ of the ‘church’ (or rather defence of the papacy) also led to many atrocities.

It was during this period that the first major witch hunt got underway. In 1486 two priests, Jacob Sprenger and Heinrich Kramer, wrote the *Malleus maleficarum*^{iv} (“The Hammer of Witches”), a handbook on how to recognise witches. A number of the Beguienes were among those burnt at the stake, for instance:

Marguerite Porete (d. 1310) was a French mystic and the author of The Mirror of Simple Souls, a work of Christian spirituality dealing with the workings of Divine Love. She was burnt at the stake for heresy in Paris in 1310. Porete had been officially warned by Church authorities that her work was heretical... One of the taboos Porete had broken was writing the book in Old French rather than in Latin...and she was eventually arrested by the local Inquisitor on grounds of heresy, in spite of claims in the book that she had consulted three church authorities about her writings, including the highly respected Master of Theology Godfrey of Fontaines, and gained their approval. Even after her death the Mirror of Simple Souls continued to be distributed across Europe, where it was translated into several languages, including English. In spite of its reputation as a heretical work it remained popular in Medieval times and in some ecclesiastical centres was embraced as an almost canonical piece of theology.^v

This was also the era of the Inquisitions.^{vi} The first was established in 1184 in southern France as a response to the Catharist heresy. The Roman Inquisition began in 1542; the infamous Spanish Inquisition, started in 1478. The majority of the people killed during these periods were women.

The nineteenth century brought industrialisation, the Enlightenment and beginnings of democracy; totally new ideas. With industrialisation, the factories came into being, which required manual labour, but not education. This led to many people being treated very badly, with little housing, food, or a decent wage. Many Orders like my own were founded during this time to liberate the poor, to teach, nurse, to do whatever was needed wherever the sisters were present. Also, many Orders had a specific missionary outreach, like my own, believing that being in the Catholic Church was the only way to achieve eternal salvation.

There are groups today which resemble the Beguines, which we call 'secular institutes', women who live alone while continuing to work in the general society. They take vows and minister in a variety of ways through their various careers. They meet regularly and follow a Rule. One such group is the "Kingship of Christ" a Franciscan institute; another is the Marianas who have just celebrated their Golden Jubilee.

In 1945 with the detonation of the first atomic bomb the world was changed forever. We entered a new era: the Nuclear Age. The old rules of war were now obsolete; a bomb can be dropped from a great distance, (so that the devastation and carnage is not visible to the perpetrator) and obliterate thousands of people and their environment in one fell swoop.

As well as the nuclear age, feminism had finally come to a head. In the Australia (and elsewhere) women had replaced the men who went to serve in the armed forces during the War. They kept the factories operating, the railways, offices, hospitals, etc. yet were expected to go back into the home when the men returned. Many refused to go back to being 'locked up' in the home with no adult company or conversation, and fought to continue working outside as well as raising the children and keeping house.

By the 1970s in Australia women were getting their deserved rights – to education, to vote, to own property, the right to equal pay was available to some women, and public housing. Women's refuges were set up where women and/or their children could be safe from abusive situations. The law also changed so that a woman could not be forced by her husband to have sexual relations with him. In other words, women were no longer the chattels of their men folk.

The developments in science and medicine benefited women offering a better understanding of the physiology of women's bodies. The contraceptive pill was welcomed by many women, and a woman was allowed to initiate divorce proceedings. Employment opportunities also increased for married as well as single women.

The invention of the World Wide Web and the internet have accelerated the spread of information and news, and aided education tremendously.

The investigations into the universe show us that we are just one small planet within numerous (possibly numberless) galaxies; that we are made of 'star dust,' yet also, that we have now the power to destroy this beautiful earth.

Because of the above, I believe we are now in an entirely new era - the Post Modern. We have come through what the scientist Thomas Kuhn in 1970 called a "paradigm shift".^{vii} Whilst Kuhn was using this term in relation to science, I believe we can apply his definition to our own situation today. Kuhn says that a paradigm shift is "a question of wholesale transformation of perspective rather than one of gradual development. It is really a revolution...a radical change in world-view." He says it is "tradition-shattering"...and that "the new paradigm general comes to be accepted through intergenerational replacement...more than through conversion of the older scientists."^{viii} This statement is important, for Kuhn sees change occurring only after one generation has handed over to the next generation, or has died!!!

I can no longer claim to know nothing of the millions of starving people throughout the world; nor of the millions who are suffering and being killed because of wars and greed. I cannot turn back the clock to before 1940s, before computers and the world wide web, before the telephone, and claim, like Schultz in *Hogan's Heroes*: "I know nothing!!"

Of all the religious communities founded before 1800, 68% are now extinct,^{ix} thus history shows that religious communities come and go as the need for their existence arises or is resolved.

The peak period (in numbers) was around the time of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65); was the Council, then, the cause of the decline?

Well before the 1950s, Sisters had begun looking at ways of renewal. (I must point out that it is MEN who were deciding how we WOMEN would live, i.e., the men in the Vatican departments wrote Canon Law!) And that has been the ongoing struggle throughout these 2,000 years, beginning with the Pastoral Letters of the New Testament!

Many communities have re-interpreted their *raison d'être*; others struggle on hoping for new members to replenish the decreasing numbers caused by the death or departure of members.

What, then, is the future role of Sisters within an increasingly multi-cultural, multi-faith, global society? What is the future, if any, of such a lifestyle?

At the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) there was a call for religious to go back to their original founding idea:

- What was the foundress' dream (charism)?
- Why did they begin?
- Are they still responding to the needs of **this** era, some forty years later?
- What changes need to be made in our lifestyle to continue to respond effectively?

This call for renewal was welcomed by most women who were already living the lifestyle and saw that change was necessary- that they needed new "Rules" to free themselves to respond to this new world. Hence, going back to the original Charism allowed them to recover the 'spirit' of the foundress, and yet not be limited by the 'letter' of the rule.

Now, more than forty years after Vatican II, the urgency of world poverty, wars, and religious/racial conflicts demand our concerted attention. The world is now a global village, and we have become aware that what we do in one part of the world affects the rest of it. This new age requires new responses - new theologies and new ways of living the call of God to bring about the Reign of God, a place, here and now, where everyone is respected and love for who they are.

Today there are eight thousand Australian religious women and men in 175 Orders at home and abroad. In Melbourne where I lived at present there are 1,323 religious sisters of many Orders, so we are still quite a large number.

Many Orders were begun to teach or nurse the poor, work for housing for them; e.g, social welfare and social justice situations. As awareness grew of the needs in the rest of the world, many Orders sent

members overseas as well. Orders which began with medical work have now branched out to other areas such as social works and advocacy. Teaching orders also have extended their ministry to other areas.

There are communities which have Associates - lay people who share in the spirituality and work of the Order but do not take vows, and continue their lives as before. Also there are communities comprised of priests, religious and lay persons, men and women, married couples and celibates sharing life and sometimes buildings (e.g., sharing one house/monastery.)

As an example of what is occurring generally, I will use my own community. The Franciscan Missionaries of Mary (FMM) were founded for specifically missionary work worldwide. We were founded in India in 1877 by a French woman, Helene de Chappotin. At the time of the Foundress' death in 1904 (27 years after the foundation) the Institute had some 2,000 sisters in 25 countries spread over four continents. At our peak in 1966 we were 11,060. Today we are 7,800 in 70 countries worldwide, with about 75 in Australia.

Over these last 135 years since we were founded, we have seen many changes in the Community, depending on where the Sisters were serving. Rather than taking on one particular ministry (e.g., nursing or teaching) Helene said we were to remain open to serve in whatever way was necessary wherever we were asked to go. This allowed us to be quite versatile.

Many of the large works we had in Australia have had to be handed over to lay people (schools, hospital, nursing homes). I personally think this is a very good move. For too long, virtually until the Second Vatican Council, Catholics in general (and some Sisters included) held the idea that the Sisters were the 'professionals' and that the laity had little or no formal role in the life of the church. We now work with others, Christians and non-Christians, to witness to God's love and deep concern for everyone and everything; for a better world for everyone; for world peace.

While we no longer run retreat houses, but we have sisters in spiritual direction; teachers and nurses are involved with refugees and migrants, working in advocacy for Aboriginal communities and against trafficking in persons, and working with peoples of other religions for the common good. In other words, we respond to whatever need we perceive here in Australia.

What is important is how we respond to the call of God to bring about the Reign of God everywhere. As missionaries we go, as our Foundress said, "to the most distant and dangerous places which Christ is not known..." We go only to so called 'first world' countries to get members as there are many Christians already there.

We came to Australia in 1941, and many women joined from here. Now we in Australia are ageing rapidly, and many of us can no longer be very 'active.' Is this the end? In Australia, maybe, but that is for the Holy Spirit to worry about, not us. Australia has many Christians who witness to the love and deep concern of God for everyone, so each day is a new beginning, a new call, a chance for a new response.

We are in a very different world to that of 1966 when I entered. So much has changed, and needed to, and hopefully will continue to change, for if not, we show that we are not listening to the voice of the Holy Spirit. In fact, I believe we have not listened sufficiently to the Holy Spirit, as after Vatican II we tried to 'preserve' the charism, by all being the same - in Europe as in Asia, the Americas and Australia.

We have been told we should go back into the habit so that we are visible, and take on large, visible works. This goes against what Jesus did; he did not wear clothing that made him stand out. In fact, he chided the Pharisees for doing just that. We do not need to be seen, but to be 'being' disciples, doing as Jesus did. People will know who the true disciples are by how we live, as the scripture says: "By their fruit you will know them" (Mt 7:16).

We are privileged to be part of the unfolding of the works of creation in this day and age. This is our responsibility for now. For the future? We leave that to the guidance of the Holy Spirit. There are many new ways of commitment arising today, and there are more options other than life-vows within a particular Religious Order. God continues to call people to serve the Reign of God in new ways in

each era. We will be faithful if we remain open to the signs of the times, and listen to the voice of the Spirit within and without. Then there can be the continuation of reign of God her on earth.

I look forward to what God has in store for the future, to see in what new and exciting ways women the world over are being called by God to take part in the continuous unfolding of this wonderful universe.

ⁱ Most of this is taken from CHITTISTER, Joan. **Women, Ministry and the Church**. (Ramsay, NJ: Paulist Press, 1983), pp118-119.

ⁱⁱ "Beguines," Catholic Encyclopedia, <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/02389c.htm>.

ⁱⁱⁱ *ibid.*

^{iv} ***Malleus maleficarum*** / translated with an introduction, bibliography and notes by Montague Summers (London: Pushkin Press, 1948).

^v "Beguines," <http://www2.kenyon.edu/projects/margin/beguines.htm>

^{vi} "Inquisition," <http://www.catholic.com/library/Inquisition.asp>.

^{vii} KUHN, Thomas. **The Structure of Scientific Revolutions**. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), p7.

^{viii} *ibid* p14.

^{ix} See CHITTISTER, Joan, **Women, Ministry and the Church**, p119.