

FEMININE PERSPECTIVES ON RELIGIOUS LIFE IN POST-MODERNITY: THE WORK OF SANDRA SCHNEIDERS I.H.M.

The seeds of my interest in this area of theology and practice were sown in 1996 when I was given a short sabbatical at the Catholic University of Leuven in Belgium. There, as a fellow member of my sabbatical group at the American College, I met a remarkable woman who has become a close friend. She is a Grey Nun of Montreal and has served at the highest levels in her Order. Then I was exposed to the first ever Professor of Feminist Theology in the University of Leuven, another remarkable lady, Hetlisch Meyer-Wilmas. I was present at her inaugural lecture and was bowled over by her wisdom and sanity. Also in Leuven, I was living cheek by jowl with the ancient Beguinage which is now part of the university. The last Beguine only died in 1988. The spirituality of those remarkable women of Flanders impregnates the very stones of that beautiful place. Since returning to Downside in 1996 I have been the Vicar for Religious for our diocese of Clifton. My work in that capacity with every type of female religious has convinced me that the place of these people in the Church will be one of the great areas of growth and development in the third millennium.

Two recent books by Sandra Schneiders — 'Finding the Treasure' and 'Selling All' — to be followed by a third volume in due course, seem to me to be one of the most significant contributions to the debate since Vatican II. I will focus on her insights into Commitment, Consecrated Celibacy and Community Life. These are topics which have general importance for both active women religious and EBC monks, and for enclosed nuns, such as we have in the English Congregation. The reason I am so attracted to this author is that she has remained faithful to her vocation to the religious life throughout all the upheaval since the Council; has impregnated her impressive academic work with a life of prayer; and shows huge optimism and enthusiasm for the future of religious life. Schneiders has been a member of the Order of the Immaculate Heart of Mary for some 50 years. She holds the Chair of New Testament and Spirituality at the Jesuit School of Theology, Berkeley, California. Since the death of Raymond E. Brown, she is the world's greatest living academic expert on St John's Gospel.

Schneiders's first volume in her trilogy is entitled FINDING THE TREASURE. Its sub-title is informative - 'Locating Catholic Religious Life in a New Ecclesial and Cultural Context'. The author has read, marked and inwardly digested the great plethora of books and articles published on the Religious Life in the 1980s and 90s. Her own contributions have been immense. Her basic premiss is stated at the outset (p. ix): 'It is the underlying presupposition of this work that for Religious Life and those who live it in faith there is indeed a future full of hope.' That hope has to be realised in the actual time and place in which we now live - the Postmodern World. The author provides her own, brilliant, analysis of postmodernity (pp. 110 ff). Both the Medieval world view and that of the Modern world were UNITARY. The main difference was that God was the centre of unity for the Medieval world, and Man for the world of the Renaissance. Postmodernity is primarily characterised by the loss of the unitary world view with a resulting fragmentation of reality on every level. The postmodern person (which includes us Religious) lives in a world of universal and irresolvable RELATIVISM. Coupled with this, there is in our global village a growing realisation that the Christian METANARRATIVE is only one of many such seeking to make sense of the world. This has resulted in a great sense of ALIENATION with people withdrawing into their own enclosed worlds, the world of an uneasy tolerance: 'You do your thing and I'll do mine'. That means that our realities are essentially unrelated and I do not want to hear about yours, nor have you intrude into mine. This is a world of CHAOS - but chaos need not mean disaster but rather opportunity. It all depends on how you see the world. Schneiders's great insight, based on the work of quantum physics, is that the postmodern world is ORGANIC rather than MECHANICAL. We shall see that this is a fruitful insight for Religious Life today.

In this first volume, Schneiders develops her thesis that the MONK is the anthropological archetype of all religious life which places the God-quest at its heart. She is right to emphasise that the vast majority of Religious who have persevered in their vocation have always centred that vocation on the mysterious attraction of a personal call of God to live this strange and wonderful way of life. Even though women Religious have pioneered so many social reforms, founding schools, hospitals, relief

agencies for the poor, for prisoners, for unmarried mothers and a myriad other good works, rarely does one find an individual Religious grounding her life on anything other than the spiritual quest for God in response to an overwhelming sense of vocation.

Of special note in this first volume is the author's thesis that the VIRGIN is the psychological archetype of the Religious Life. Consecrated Virgins are the oldest 'Order' in the Church going way back to the first century of the Christian Era. Those women lived dangerously ('prophetically') in refusing to become part of the established order of the Roman Empire as mothers of children or as economic producers. They stood out as autonomous agents. They said that they were in love with Jesus Christ alone. The author is right in believing that the time is right to develop a spirituality of consecrated celibacy for women on the basis of female experience of the meaning of sexuality. This is radically different from a male theology based on male understanding of sexuality. The fact that all 24 Vicars for Religious (many of them women) of England and Wales consistently report a growth of interest among women of all ages, types, educational background and life experience, in becoming Consecrated Virgins in their local churches would seem to support Schneiders's view that this vocation for women in the Church retains all its ancient vigour and importance.

There is no time for me to expand my presentation of all the wonderful insights into the current position of women in today's Church which are developed in this first volume. Suffice it to mention as of central importance the author's analysis of the situation today in terms of the Dark Night of the Soul in St John of the Cross's theology. This is a time of devastating turmoil for women in the Church in general, and of women Religious in particular, but also a time which Schneiders believes to be a purifying fire in preparation for a great flowering of new life. Her emphasis on Religious Life as one of God's great GIFTS TO THE CHURCH is central to her optimism, as is her understanding of the role of all women Religious in today's Church as PROPHETS IN THEIR OWN COUNTRY destined to be rejected, it seems, by all.

Her images are always profound. Her fascination with the images of quantum physics provide her with telling analogies. Religious Life, like the quantum world, is an intricate holistic system. The boundaries of Religious Life are not, she suggests, like fences or walls, cutting us off from the rest of creation. Rather, they are like skins, organs of contact and interchange which bring together Religious Life and its environs without destroying its identity. Quantum systems are 'open' (like clouds) rather than 'closed' (like clocks). Religious Life is organic rather than mechanical. Hence the constant experience in the history of the Church of women Religious bursting the bonds of Canon Law in pursuit of the God-quest in their own life situation. Religious Life, and especially as lived by women, is a love affair with Jesus Christ involving a total and irrevocable self-gift to the exclusion of any other primary relationship, life project, or cause. Religious occupy a zone of insecurity and self-doubt because they cannot, if they are true prophets, count on validation or approval from authority, or support from their beneficiaries. This raises obvious questions for EBC houses at this point in their history. Perhaps the monasteries of men, in particular, have become in their recent pasts too enmeshed in the hierarchical and social structures of the Church and wider society for their own good. Perhaps God is calling us once more into the wilderness where He can espouse us to Himself in renewed love, and through that espousal, can give Himself to His Beloved Church in new and more radical ways.

Schneiders's second volume is entitled: SELLING ALL. Its subtitle is: 'Commitment, Consecrated Celibacy and Community in Catholic Religious Life.' The book is neatly divided into three parts, each part dealing with one of those topics.

Part 1 deals with COMMITMENT. There are three chapters, dealing respectively with 'Vocation and Discernment', 'Formation and Incorporation' and 'Commitment and Profession.' The author develops her thesis that 'Becoming a Religious is a PROCESS that begins with a decision by an individual who feels personally called by God to enter Religious Life within a particular congregation and the corresponding decision of the congregation to accept the candidate for a period of mutual discernment.' She rightly emphasises the great differences which face religious communities today from those of the recent past in accepting candidates to their way of life. She emphasises what everyone involved with formation knows only too well, namely, that today it is of vital importance that the prospective candidate for entry into our communities needs to be very clear about what he or

she is undertaking and its responsibilities. Her treatment of community life is masterly. Schneiders emphasises that Religious life is a STATE OF LIFE like marriage. It is a choice about what one will do with one's capacity for love. Religious make an ultimate choice of a PERSON – Jesus Christ. Consecrated celibacy is, therefore, the heart of Religious Life. The discernment of whether one is truly called to Religious Life bears most importantly on the question of whether one feels personally called, for religious reasons, to the particular type of relationship with Jesus Christ that is expressed in consecrated celibacy. The author has much of value for novice masters and mistresses in her treatment of vocation and discernment. A large part of the latter is 'sorting out the tangled skein of motivation.' Discernment she identifies as (in vocational terms): 'a process of coming to an informed decision before God of what I should do here and now.' She emphasises a current problem with regard to mature candidates for entry into a religious community, namely, their resistance to a formation programme. Such people need to be handled by sensitive directors! She is brilliant in describing the drifters in religious communities, **who** cannot make up their minds whether to stay or go. PRAYER is the central arena for making an informed decision before God. (p.22) There is a very good analysis of the different dangers inherent in monastic life and in active life in a religious congregation. Ministerial religious can become superficial in their activity. Monks and nuns, however, have different problems: 'The autonomous monastery provides a stable environment that fosters growth in prayer and deepening of community but it can also foster self-absorption, resignation to a kind of well-ordered mediocrity that avoids challenge and change, the superficial tolerance bred by over-familiarity with one's companions rather than deep relationships, or a low-grade boredom that leads to a comfortable routine but minimal growth'!!

Part 2 of this second volume deals with the core subject of CONSECRATED CELIBACY. There are 4 sub-headings: Celibacy as Charism; celibacy as women's reality; celibacy and 'Family'; Celibacy and 'Home'. Celibacy is a free gift to some Christians. Having discussed the various terms used for this reality, Schneiders develops her thesis that CONSECRATED CELIBACY IS AT THE VERY HEART OF RELIGIOUS LIFE, because it alone of the vows constitutes a STATE OF LIFE. Celibacy is a positive choice of what to do with one's capacity for LOVE. It is a choice of Jesus Christ as the One whom we love primarily. It is not an escape from the burden of one's sexuality. The chapter on Celibacy as Women's Reality bursts with sound theology and common sense. The author argues for an approach to celibacy which embodies the feminine perspectives of embodiment. The remaining two chapters discuss the danger of a religious seeking to evade the vow of celibacy by a false return to FAMILY OR HOME. She always centres her discussion on the Gospels and the Person and Life of Jesus Christ. Jesus lived both a stable life with his parents at Nazareth and an itinerant life during his public ministry. He calls disciples to both forms of life and ministry. The insights of Schneiders into the biblical texts and the realities of religious life are too numerous and dense for me to unpack in such a short talk. Those chapters repay very careful reading.

The treatment of Community is especially thoughtful and thought-provoking. Much of what the author has to say is directed primarily towards Religious Life as lived by ministerial religious. But for us, too, there is much of value. Community for Schneiders is the relational context within which our life of self-giving to God in Christ is lived out. As such, Community is essential to Religious Life in all its manifestations. She is very perceptive on the need today to be careful about admitting to our communities people whose primary motive for joining is 'community'. Such people often have no real experience or understanding of any form of community living, such as a Catholic family. I like especially the author's presentation of what she terms EVANGELICAL FRIENDSHIP as the bond of Religious Community Life. Here, her deep knowledge of St John's Gospel bears marvellous exegetical fruit.

So, I hope I have whetted your appetite for these books in this short presentation. The Holy Spirit is always at work in the Church, and I believe that we Benedictines with our own unique blend of the contemplative and the pastoral charisms, have much to contribute to Religious Life in the 21st century. For us, the vow of stability is foundational to my mind, and our witness in the fragmented postmodern world, another 'Age of Anxiety', to use the title of E.R. Dodds famous book, is surely to the value and witness of permanence and joyful living out of our vows as a Community of Gospel Friendship.

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