

Priorities in Religious Life

by Fergus Kerr, O.P.

Nobody who cares about the future of religious life should fail to study the recent essay on the subject by Jerome Murphy O'Connor, an Irish Dominican who teaches at the Ecole Biblique in Jerusalem—an entire issue of *Supplement to Doctrine and Life* is given over to it (No. 45, May-June, 1973). What he has to say is so illuminating that it is worth repeating the main idea here, adding some comments and observations to back up his argument.

1—*The raison d'être of religious life*

The question of priorities is crucial. What service do religious have to offer the Church and society? As they proceed to retrenchment and reform, the dilemma that confronts religious today is as follows: are they to decide what *work* they should be doing (teaching, nursing, preaching, whatever) and then allow the style of their life to be determined by that, or are they to make the form and quality of their *community life* the priority? Fr Murphy O'Connor is categorical: 'What is important is that religious recognize that the primary service they render to the Church and to the world is the witness of their life together as a community'. Though religious increasingly do regard their service to the Church and to society as teachers, nurses, preachers, etc., as the primary determinant and seek to define the nature of religious life in terms then of *work*, this job-oriented approach in fact distorts religious life and leads to the disintegration of religious orders and communities.

For how can religious define and justify their existence as religious primarily in terms of the jobs they undertake? Does a woman have to become a nun in order to teach or to nurse? Does one have to become a religious in order to be a theologian or a preacher? The attempt to present religious life primarily in terms of work is doomed for the simple reason that there is no work that gives religious life its unique and specific character. Anything religious can do, others can do just as well. There is no work for Church or world which is the exclusive preserve of religious. Preaching the gospel, for example, is an essential feature of the apostolic ministry and therefore the work of the bishops and of all to whom they delegate it—which means many others besides the members of the Order of Preachers. There is nothing specifically religious about preaching or teaching or nursing, nor is there anything specifically religious about the way in which religious carry out such activities. It would be mistaken to make out that the religious who undertake such work perform it with greater dedication

or efficacy than others simply because they are religious. There must be some other reason for the existence of religious besides the special cachet with which their activities are somewhat ambiguously adorned.

Why should men and women accept invitations to join religious orders to do work for the Church and for society which they can do perfectly well in other walks of life, as secular priests or as layfolk?

Nor will it do to argue that the extra dimension to the way in which the religious preaches, teaches or nurses, etc., springs from the advantage and privilege he enjoys of being able to practise the 'evangelical counsels'. The call to live the gospel as radically as that is issued to all Christians and it is obvious that many men and women not in religious life strive to answer this call. It is implausible to treat them as quasi-religious, as so often happens, to save the logic of arguments that justify religious life simply in terms of the evangelical counsels.

What is distinctive about religious life is that religious consent to live according to the evangelical counsels, but *in community*. That is the difference. The primary service religious perform for Church and society lies in the witness such communities bear to the atoning and reconciling power of Christian love—and the other work religious do must be situated in that context. It is certainly not a matter of indifference what other work religious undertake, but the priorities are reversed if the form of life is decided by the type of work. It is true that most religious orders which date from the Middle Ages and since were founded to specialize in particular types of apostolic work—preaching, teaching, nursing, etc. But acquaintance with the practice and writings of the founders soon shows how much they took it for granted that the work would always be done in and from a community of a specific kind. St Dominic was perhaps more conscious and explicit than most founders in his insistence on the kind of community life he expected the members of his order to have as the ambiance for their preaching activity. And like most founders then and since, Dominic was fascinated by those glimpses of the life of the original apostolic church-community which are vouchsafed in the so-called Lucan summaries (Acts 2:44-47 and 4:32-35). The dream of the *Vita Apostolica* has been the rationale and the catalyst of all revival of religious life, at least in the West. And 'apostolic life' there does not mean simply what we understand by 'the apostolate': on the contrary, the apostolate in the sense of active ministry and preaching would simply be an aspect—the inevitable outcome—of the life together of the apostolic community, and the preaching would be primarily in the very existence of the community at all as an instance of the power of Christ's love to reconcile the otherwise irreconcilable.

As the Dominican Constitutions say—'the first thing for which we are gathered together is that we should dwell in harmony in the house and have one mind and heart in God. . . . The *unanimitas* of our life, rooted of course in the love of God, should offer an

example of the reconciliation of all things in Christ which we preach by word of mouth'. That is the point. People cannot be expected to respond to being *told* about the reconciling power of Christ unless they are also *shown* some examples of it at work.

Religious communities exist primarily as visible demonstrations of how it lies in the grace and power of Christ's atoning love to reconcile men and women previously estranged and otherwise hopelessly divided.

2—*The religious community as ecclesiola*

The most illuminating insight that Fr Murphy O'Connor offers (but finally the most disturbing one too) is his insistence that the primary service rendered by religious is in providing a more visible and tangible demonstration of the power of Christ's reconciling love than any other group or institution in the Church can now be expected to.

What the society we live in wants to see more than anything is some visible evidence that people can be brought together in reconciliation. In the Christian perspective the given lack of harmony and community is accepted and recognized; it has a good deal to do with our being born in a sin-structured environment. The message of the gospel has always been regarded as all but incredible and as requiring great faith, but what it comes to is that all these divisive situations can be overcome: 'In Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near in the blood of Christ. For he is our peace, who has made us both one, and has broken down the dividing wall of hostility . . . that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby bringing the hostility to an end' (Ephesians 2: 13-16). The Church as it was visible in the particular local congregations familiar to Paul was a remarkable example of how people previously irreconcilable in outlook and provenance could be gathered into unity in the name of Jesus Christ. As Jews and Gentiles, rich and poor, literate and illiterate, men and women entered the new society by accepting baptism in Christ, the ancient barriers collapsed. The ethnic, linguistic, cultural, social and economic differences that incarnated and generated so much misunderstanding and enmity, disappeared in the fraternity of baptism.

It was no mystical, abstract and invisible reconciliation that Paul had in mind here. On the contrary, he knew places in which the local church-community in fact united in the name of Christ people who had every reason to distrust one another. Every parish was once compact and cohesive enough to form such an audacious experiment in reconciling people of otherwise incompatible origins and backgrounds. That was the great mystery of the original apostolic communities: it was not only that the gospel of reconciliation in the

name of Christ was *preached*, it was that the reconciliation was *effected* and *demonstrated* in particular places and at particular times. And there is no great miracle in reconciling people in Christ who already get on reasonably well because of ties of blood or shared social background and education or common financial interest or the like. The miracle is in reconciling people who have every reason to fear and hate one another. Was it for anything less that Jesus died?

As the Church spread, however, the paradox is that these demonstrations of the reconciling power of the name of Christ became increasingly less visible and therefore less plausible. It is no coincidence, then, that the first monastic communities emerged only as the Church expanded. Wherever the local congregation is small enough to provide visible testimony to the power of Christ to reconcile incompatible people there is no call for religious communities. It is as parishes and congregations become too large and too dispersed ever to exhibit the reality of how they reconcile incompatible people in Christ that men and women have felt the need to form groups 'to practice these things which they had learned to have been ordered by the apostles throughout the body of the Church in general' (John Cassian, giving the first account of religious life in the West).

What the Church requires, and what the world asks of the Church if the message of reconciliation is to become credible, is that there should be occasional visible instances of improbable reconciliations. Many a parish still does, at times, offer a striking example of how people naturally and socially separated by mutual ignorance and fear may yet be brought together, at least sporadically, in the name of Christ, but the historical origin and the only relevance of religious is that they should provide, in times and places in which the Church is very dispersed, some existential witness to the power of Christ's love to reconcile enemies to one another ('If you love the people who love you, what special goodness have you shown? Do not even pagans show as much?').

What group or institution is there in the Church today that can easily demonstrate the reconciling power of Christ? The witness of a Christian marriage can always be explained in other terms—sexual attraction or whatever. As family life continues to disintegrate in our society, however, the very existence of a united family is becoming a remarkable phenomenon, and notions like mutual fidelity and sacrifice do begin to seem relevant. But the religious community has no other *raison d'être* by the world's standards than the power of the grace of Christ to gather people together. It is not easy to find natural, biological or psychological reasons for the continued existence of a religious community.

That homosexuals are attracted to religious life, for instance, as critics and enquirers often suggest, is plainly true, and some of them prove acceptable members of these ongoing experiments in reconciling

incompatibles which religious communities essentially are—but it is equally clear that most religious are heterosexual by inclination and that is the disposition upon which they must construct their personal understanding of consecrated celibacy. It is, however, part of the reconciling power of Christ to enable men of different sexual inclinations to live together in relative serenity and it would be a restriction of the scope of the experiment to exclude one or other of the parties. In fact, as an over-simple homosexual/heterosexual difference comes increasingly under criticism, it is possible that consecrated celibates may have a good deal more to discover about their sexual option and even something to offer to the general debate.

What the Church has never needed more than it does now, then, is the continued existence of communities that bear visible and tangible witness to the power of the name of Christ to gather together and reconcile people who would on all natural and social grounds be inclined to remain divided and hostile. The religious community is called to be a microcosm of the Church as the community of reconciliation. The religious community is a particular instance of the reconciled and reconciling community which is the Church. The religious community, in that sense, is the Church in miniature, an *ecclesiola*.

3—*The adversities of the experiment*

Why is it, then, that as Fr Murphy O'Connor says, 'the majority of religious communities today have little or no witness value'? Why is it, one must first ask, that the Church itself has so little witness value? There is no need to be exaggeratedly gloomy—the Catholic Church in Britain and Ireland does manage to draw together people of diametrically opposing views and backgrounds and to that extent succeeds in offering some witness to the reconciling power of the name of Christ. Having said that, however, one must immediately qualify it by pointing out that the separation between religion and morals has become so deep that it is now common for people to worship together while devoting their lives to mutual destruction (Galatians 5:14-15), without realizing it of course. And connected with this very serious diminishment of the depth of the reconciliation among us, and perhaps the cause of it, is the much more obvious fact that, after all, we have settled for something much less than a programme of total reconciliation of all things in Christ. From very early on in the history of the Church the attempt to reconcile Jew and Gentile was abandoned—worse than that, it turned into a diabolical effort to increase the hostility between the two. It is perhaps only in our own day, in gestures by John XXIII and Paul VI, that we began to remember that the power of Christ's reconciling love was once meant to extend to Jews too. Over the centuries we have accepted greater and greater restrictions upon the freedom with which we may experiment in the power of Christ to reconcile enemies.

The same is true of religious orders and communities. In fact the process of eliminating all possible grounds for tension and incompatibility before the experiment in Christian reconciliation even starts seems to be accelerating. There have always been religious orders in England in which postulants from Irish families were not welcome—just as there have been Irish religious working in England for years without ever having a native vocation. The elimination of the lay brother from many monasteries and religious houses removes the one person in the group who left school early and thus represents the educational level and approach of the vast majority of the citizens of this country. Is it any improvement of the quality of religious life that religious should be drawn more and more only from one particular kind of school? Certainly the relationship between lay brothers and priests in a religious community can be uneasy and even tragic—but what does it show about our faith in the reconciling power of Christ if we decide to exclude lay brothers altogether? The end of the line is now being reached in the creation of communities of like-minded religious, all of an age or engaged in similar work. Such groups certainly make very efficient teams to work on certain projects for the good of the Church and for society—but these are work-oriented groups, not religious communities in the sense of genuine experiments in reconciling love.

Is the gospel of reconciliation going to sound any more credible to people coping with elderly and crotchety relatives when it is preached to them by religious who have cleared their own houses of the old and the dotty? It is incredible that, in a time when the Church and society want more tangible evidence of the power of Christ to reconcile enemies and strangers, the trend in religious orders is to eliminate in advance all possible grounds for tension and incompatibility. The pressure towards uniformity in the educational and social background of potential recruits is even encouraged by entrance requirements and selection procedures. The explanation for this is that religious have become enchanted by the idea of forming teams of experts efficiently organized to perform certain services for the Church and for society. They are putting work first because they have lost patience with the interminable business of keeping incompatible people together in the name of Christ—that is plain from the criticisms that are now so common: anybody who makes the quality of community life his priority is immediately accused of being introverted, inward-looking, insecure, monastic, contemplative, etc.

Well, there is a place for teams of experts—good luck to them. But what the Church and the world want is real evidence that disharmony and misunderstanding, distrust and incompatibility, can be overcome, and they will believe it is possible only when they see visible and tangible demonstration of it. The world at any rate is getting tired of teams of experts who have more to say than to show for what they

mean, and the Church will not be long in moving the same way. The testimony that convinces now is non-verbal and existential—the testimony of life.

The call now is for religious to form communities out of more incompatible elements than ever before—to demonstrate that old and young, Irish and English, peasants and urban sophisticates, university graduates and those who left school early, etc., can sometimes live in harmony. It is time there were communities in England experimenting with the possibility that Anglican religious and Catholic religious might be able to live together even with all that must continue to divide them. It is time too that there were religious communities to demonstrate that men and women can live together in consecrated celibacy. Perhaps it is time to experiment with religious communities like the establishment St Dominic founded at Prouille and the house St Catherine ran in Siena.

The house at Prouille was a convent of nuns with a group of associated priests using the place as base for preaching in the neighbourhood, but there were also lay brothers and *donati* as well as whole families of both freedmen and serfs, many of whom had bound themselves to work the community land in return for a share in the common liturgy and economy. The house in Siena brought priests and layfolk together primarily to pray with Catherine but also to form a pressure group for her various projects and to engage in a great variety of apostolic works. It no doubt took a charismatic figure to lead these extraordinary communities ('settlements' rather): the scope for misunderstanding and tension and quarrelling in them makes the mind boggle. But it will surely only be when religious become adventurous enough in the power of the Holy Spirit to attempt such efforts at community-making that they will begin to offer the specific witness to Church and world that they have the call and the grace to bear.

To sum up. The *raison d'être* of religious life consists not in the provision of specific services but primarily in the witness value of its corporate existence. 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. This means that the witness value of the community depends on its being a setting and on its providing an ambiance in which people can reach that kind of reconciliation with each other and with God which will then give its quality to whatever work individuals or the group may undertake. It is clear that if preaching the gospel is the work of a religious community it will be vain except on the basis of community experience in which reconciliation of incompatibles in the name of Christ has really been attempted. Religious must therefore pay far more heed to the quality of the life they lead together and face the problems that arise under the heading of liturgy, poverty, authority, etc., and not allow themselves to be put off by those who tell them this is inward-looking and

misguided. On the contrary, these are the problems that arise when religious begin to get their priorities right—and, as I have said, nobody can do better than read Fr Murphy O'Connor on the subject.

Black Racism in Burundi

by Jeremy J. Greenland

Burundi is very small by African standards, almost the same size as Belgium, its former colonial master. Situated at the northern end of Lake Tanganyika, Burundi's neighbours are Tanzania, Rwanda and Zaire. Hills like vast sandcastles rise from a narrow plain along the lake to heights of over 2000m on the Nile-Congo watershed. Burundi's population is estimated at 3.7 million. Because the density of population is so high, and because there are no minerals or other natural resources worth exploiting commercially, all except the educated élite are poor subsistence farmers and herdsman. The sale of coffee—nearly all of which is bought by the United States, supposedly for political reasons—accounts for some 80 per cent of all foreign exchange earnings, though attempts are now being made to diversify agricultural production with tea, cotton and rice as secondary cash-crops.

Three ethnic groups make up the population: the pygmoid Twa, only 1 per cent of the total and politically of no account, the agriculturist Hutu, a Bantu tribe who make up 85 per cent, and the cattle-herding Tutsi (14 per cent). Legend and some facts assert that the Tutsi are of Nilotic-Hamitic origins, that they came late to Burundi and reduced the Hutu to client status by leasing them cows in return for personal service and food. 'Tutsi' is somewhat of a simplification: there appear to have been two separate invasions, first the Abanyaruguru clans, literally 'those from the north', and then later the Hima clans who entered and now occupy mainly the south-east part of the country.

Spokesmen for the present government claim that it is the colonialist who is to blame for the very existence of tribal conflict in Burundi:

'Even those historians and ethnologists who most defended the colonial regime had never heard of nor taken account of the conflict or opposition between the Hutu and the Tutsi before colonization.' (*Livre Blanc*, Bujumbura, 1972, p. 2. translated JJG.)

Perhaps the ethnologist Meyer foresaw the need to deal with such allegations when he wrote (1916):

'As long as the Batussi (sic) are masters in the country, spiritual and cultural progress is impossible for the Burundi people, for it is only