

**VOCATION CRISIS:****A COMMUNITY'S****SELF-FULFILLING PROPHECY (1/2)**

Since the mid-sixties there has been a steady decline in the number of women and men who are choosing the religious style of living. The average age of community members continues to rise. Retirement houses are bursting at the seams while novitiates stand idle and empty or have been converted for other uses. Religious communities have been forced to examine personnel commitments which the group has made, to redefine the kind of presence which they will have in institutions, to withdraw from certain ministries and to consolidate others.

There are some analysts, sociologists and other experts, who paint a grim picture of the future for religious communities. From the perspective of those historians who have put this phenomenon in the context of the total history of religious life we see that there have been other times when a «vocation crisis» has led to renewal and revitalization. Along with these historians there are visionaries who describe the future of religious life and outline its possibilities.

Simultaneous with the described «vocation crisis», religious communities are experiencing radical changes. There are changes in self-understanding, styles of prayer, community, theology of vows, manner of dress, etc. There are new forms of ministry which do not necessitate a group commitment. In short, the uniformity which at one time characterized the religious life style has changed to plurality and diversity of life styles. The basic structure remains: some form of community, prayer, ministry, vowed life and celibacy.

All of the above is important to the continuing dialogue and subsequent plans of action for communities as they prepare for the future. There is, though, at least one more perspective on the «vocation crisis» which is as significant and calls for the same consideration.

**IS THERE A DEATH WISH?**

For many religious communities, the past twenty year experience has been exciting, new, meaningful and hope-filled while at the same time tumultuous, confusing, perplexing and uncertain. The community's pastoral ministry of vocations today evokes confusion and uncertainty about its present identity and its future. Because religious communities are unclear about their corporate image, they are uncertain about what to present to potential members and those who influence their choices. A religious community needs to address this confusion and uncertainty before vocation ministry within the community can be effective.

The experiences of the diminishment, aging, consolidation and radical change in life style are impacting on the group's view of the future. It is essential for the religious community to assess its present attitude about the future. It is especially important for the community to assess the impact that declining numbers has had on the group's attitude toward and belief in a future FOR THEMSELVES. The group's perspective is one of the most important factors in shaping the process of revitalization and renewal.

Some religious communities believe that the «vocation crisis» cannot be addressed. They hold that there are too many sociological and cultural factors which are determining the group's future. They believe that there are many things which militate against a person choosing to be a member of their group. These factors seem to be beyond their control. They feel that they are powerless victims and refuse any responsibility for what is happening. They will not acknowledge that they are potential agents for change. These communities will not believe that they can influence the course which the future will take. The «vocation crisis» is happening to them. More accurately, they are allowing the experience of diminishment to have more power than it should. If the group has this pervasive attitude, the «vocation crisis» will become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Societal and cultural influences do have a powerful impact on the vocation picture in the Church. These influences, though, are given more power than they deserve and can paralyze a group. More importantly, they can shape the groups' view of the future by robbing a religious community of its own power to effect change.

If a religious community believes that they are powerless to affect what, at best, is an uncertain future, then this will be automatically conveyed to others. Those to whom they minister will sense their fear and anxiety. Those who might consider membership would be shunned by this unspoken and subtle death wish. No person would choose to work for a corporation who believed it would be bankrupt in a matter of time. No person would board a ship which was to be set adrift

to be tossed about by the elements. Nor would any person take a membership in a health club where all the members allow their physical condition to deteriorate because they have no desire to improve.

## MOTIVATION FOR VOCATION MINISTRY

A related attitude among some religious which also shuns potential members is the yearning for the time in their history before the «vocation crisis» and the changes in religious life. Large numbers entering the novitiate gave veteran members a sign that their choice was still credible. These large numbers of new members enabled them to expand and make even more institutional commitments. There is a desire to again be a part of a great influential network of institutions, and to enjoy the impact and power which came with that responsibility. There is a desire for the status which came with being a religious who contributed to this network. There is a nostalgia which, by its very nature, does not allow religious to let go of the past. Some community members will perpetuate the «vocation crisis» precisely because their grief over the loss of what was only serves to point to stagnation and death.

Consequently, for some, the desire for new membership stems primarily from these yearnings. Hidden in these yearnings is a denial of death which keeps some from seeing the possibilities for new life. The subconscious desire to appease their grief becomes the motivation for vocation ministry. For these, many new members would be sign of regained status, power and prestige. This increase is seen as a source of self-esteem and pride. This motivation for seeking new membership keeps religious communities from addressing the hard questions of renewal and revitalization. Vocation ministry for these religious communities becomes recruitment. The ultimate goal of recruitment is to serve the community and not the individual who is discerning a vocation. Needless to say, a potential member will be hard pressed to consider joining a group with these sentiments.

Discussion of vocations and the «vocation crisis» in these settings are invariably filled with frustration and lead to feelings to helplessness, inadequacy, doubt and further anxiety. Still, the concerns of vocation ministry and its relationship to renewal must continually be brought to the consciousness of the group. It is always difficult to look at the past and be reminded of the pain which was associated with making renewal possible. To remember the ambiguity, the indecision and the confusion seems only to reopen wounds which one wants so much to remain healed even if only superficially.

Questions about the group's commitment to the future remain unasked. I believe the vocation ministers of the religious community are among those who are charged with the challenge of raising these questions and concerns.

There is another motivation for the desire to have new members. It stems from the yearning for life, for what could be, for possibilities, for urgent needs to be met and for dynamic growth. It is the motivation of religious women and men who have the experience of being called to religious life by God. When this call is heard continually throughout life it becomes a powerful source which promotes self-confidence and hope for the future. The vocation is continually chosen as a response to a God who wants the individual to be happy. The religious person hears this invitation in the everyday events of life: through people who are entrusted to their care. The trusting response to the Caller is made again and again throughout their life.

These religious women and men are in touch with an evolving dream for themselves, their community and the world. They have found a community within which their dream comes alive. They have discovered a Church wherein many communities have joined to announce the Reign of God. They look for others who will share this dream and help make it a reality. A religious person with these felt convictions, dreams and hopes, sees her/himself as a positive addition, a significant part, a unique person in the Church. They know that their community continues to be an instrument of God's love in the world. They sense that they and their community are needed today and have a role in the future. They are convinced that they are a gift for others. Their life has meaning and significance because they are, along with other members of the Church, called to make the dream of the Reign of God a reality. Having contact with such religious is an empowering experience for potential members because it is inviting and attractive.

This view of the self, the community and the Church becomes the underlying motivation for wanting new membership. Religious want to share this experience with others. They feel the life style is important for this world and there is a significant place for it. This person radiates her/his convictions and is attractive because of his/her stance toward life. An invitation extended to another to consider this life style is powerful because it is an invitation to be part of a life-giving, vibrant and vital group.

These are two extremes. Hopefully, as religious communities move toward the fullness of renewal, they will also move toward a more positive and healthy view of themselves. Consequently, their life style will become a more attractive option for those who have yet to make a life style choice.

**Brother Joe Samson**