

THAT WAS THEN.....THIS IS NOW

The Past, Present, and Future of Women Religious in the United States Adapted from a talk by Sandra M. Schneiders, IHM, September, 2011



I come to praise this life, not to bury it. There are many enthusiastic friends of Sisters who fear that the Religious they love are a vanishing breed, if not an endangered species. And there is a small but vociferous group of gleeful traditionalists who hope that the case of Religious is terminal. I would suggest, without minimizing the very real challenges which we face at this critical juncture in the history of Religious Life, that the notice of our demise is greatly exaggerated.

The Past

In 1720 the first 12 Religious arrived in what is now the United States. It took more than a hundred years, till 1830, for that number to grow to about 500 in the country as a whole, the number in one medium-sized Congregation today. Over the next 70 years that number increased a hundredfold, from 500 in 1830 to nearly 50,000 in 1900. The mid-19th to mid-20th century was the period of the great waves of immigrants into America, many arriving from Catholic countries. Women Religious were the primary agents in keeping these newly arrived Catholics grounded in their faith. Sisters built the Catholic school and hospital systems, provided social services of all kinds. The big “surge” in the numbers of American-born women entering Religious Life, a somewhat ambiguous demographic phenomenon that has shaped, or distorted, the imagination of today’s Catholics about what Religious Life should look like, took place in two and a half decades. Between 1940 and 1965 about forty-five to fifty thousand women entered the convent, roughly the same number in twenty-five years that had entered in the first two centuries. At the height of this surge there were more than 180,000 women Religious in this country, with a median age probably between forty and fifty.

These women, with papal encouragement and their own resourcefulness, were being educated well beyond the level of most American women, and the more than 400 Congregations, both those transplanted from Europe and many natively founded, now owned, administered, and staffed an amazing network of Catholic institutions including over a hundred colleges and universities serving the Catholic population which would soon constitute the largest single denomination in the country. The 1960’s was a turbulent and exciting time in both the Church and secular culture. Vatican II, the Civil Rights Movement, the Vietnam War, the third wave of Women’s Liberation, the sexual revolution, to name just the most explosive events and movements, radically altered the cultural and religious landscape. This was the context of the sudden decline in the number of women Religious, from the highpoint in 1965 of more than 180,000 to slightly less than a third of that number today.

As the total number declined, virtually all the loss was at the lower end of the age scale as far fewer young women entered and a large number of younger Religious left. The median age of those who stayed, therefore, rose dramatically. Today there are about fifty-nine to sixty thousand women Religious with a median age around seventy in most congregations. It is estimated that over the nearly three centuries since Religious arrived in this country there have been about 220,000 women who have lived this vocation. In fact, there are about ten thousand more women in Religious Life today than there were at any point between 1720 and 1900.

The Present

Despite the very large number of women Religious in the United States, the present situation is alarming to many people, in and outside the life, not so much because of the actual numbers -- 59 to 60,000 is an impressive number -- but because of the precipitous *decline in numbers* and because of the *age distribution* of Religious who are primarily 60 to 90 years old. Some people... believe the decline in numbers is due to the infidelity, or poor "quality of life" of the Sisters. I want to clear some space for some serious discussion of the situation by pointing out two reasons for dismissing this pseudo-theological nonsense. The first is that the dramatic decline in numbers entering the convent since Vatican II is quite adequately explained by a powerful concentration of historical and sociological factors in the mid-1960's to mid-1980's. The second is that a major theological development in the Council's teaching not only disinclined many from entering but supported the choice of many younger professed Religious to leave. It is the combination of non-entrance and departures of younger people who were not replacing the elderly who have died during the post-conciliar period that has reduced the total number, and raised the median age in Religious Life today. In other words, the huge and rapid decline would have occurred even if every woman in the convent were a shoo-in candidate for canonization with three miracles on her scorecard at the moment of death.

Some of the factors in the decline of entrants are the following. First, the average size of Catholic families declined precipitously in the second half of the twentieth century supplying far fewer possible candidates. Second, dioceses and parishes, for a variety of reasons, closed many of the "feeder institutions" of Religious Life, namely Catholic grade and high schools, while civil legislation prevented or wiped out auxiliary funding for many others which were forced to close. Thus, Catholic children and youth, already far fewer in number because of the declining birth rate of Catholic families, had far less contact with Religious during their formative years. Third, Catholic girls, until the late 1950s, were largely limited in their vocational choices to early marriage and a lifetime of childrearing or Religious Life with its somewhat broader spectrum of educational and professional opportunities. In the second half of the 20th century, many more young women began to attend college and their professional and employment options expanded enormously. These three sociological factors, namely, declining number of girls in Catholic families, less contact with Sisters during their formative years, and expanded vocational options for young women, significantly decreased the numbers of young women entering. However, these factors were exacerbated by Vatican II's emphatic teaching on the universal vocation to one and the same holiness of all the members of Christ and the call of all the People of God, in virtue of their baptism and confirmation, to participate in the Church's mission and ministries. In other words, holiness was no longer reserved to the nuns and one no longer had to be a Religious to exercise all the ministries in the Church open to the non-ordained. Why then should one undertake a life which involved the sacrifice of marriage and family, and especially now that a much larger measure of personal independence and material well-being was available to educated women in the secular sphere?

These theological developments were not only a disincentive for some young women who would likely have entered Religious Life in pre-conciliar times but also a motive for many younger Religious, especially those in their 30s, 40s, and early 50s, to re-evaluate their original decision to become Sisters. Many came to realize that their real motives for entering had been primarily the desire for deeper spirituality and/or access to quasi-official ministries. Since both were possible in a committed secular Christian life, without the obligations of Religious Life, many of these younger Religious chose, rightly, to leave. Most of these Religious had not "lost their vocations" through infidelity nor were they alienated from their Congregations. They simply realized that, whatever had been the case when they entered, they now were not called to Religious Life which is a distinctive vocation in itself, not the sole path to holiness nor the only path to ministry. There are, then, on the human level perfectly cogent

sociological, cultural, and theological explanations for the decline in numbers and rise in age of Religious in the post-conciliar period.

Painful and discouraging as the present situation can appear, the temptation to interpret it through the conviction that God rewards fidelity with worldly success (i.e., numbers, money, admiration by the multitudes, and the approval of authorities, etc.) and, therefore, that the current lack of such success is a sign of divine displeasure with today's Religious, represents seriously flawed theological reasoning. One is tempted to cite, to those critics of contemporary Religious Life who are shedding crocodile tears over the imminent demise of the lifeform, Jesus' words to Peter who rejected Jesus' imminent death as God's way of saving the world: "Get behind me, Satan! You are a scandal to me; for you are judging not as God does, but as humans do" (see Mt. 16:23). Faith in the Resurrection is precisely hope, in the face of human powerlessness, in God's power that is made perfect in weakness (see 2 Cor. 12:7-9). The criteria of the validity of the *prophetic vocation* in the Church and world today are the same we see in the life of Jesus whose popularity among the masses lasted less than a year, who was denied and betrayed by his own, rejected by the religious hierarchy as a blasphemer leading the people astray, and framed and murdered by the civil authorities threatened by his non-worldly Reign. It might be important, also, to recall that the only disciples who were left standing -- at the foot of the Cross and at the tomb on Easter morning -- were the women.

In short, Religious Life is not a for-profit venture whose product needs repackaging or a new advertising campaign because the bottom line is not showing a profit. Religious are not selling anything. And in any case, the Cross is never going to capture much of the market share, even among good people. *The real question is, are the people in Religious Life today truly called to that life? Are they living it with integrity and passion? And are they offering it clearly and compellingly to people who are genuinely called to it today, even though, for many reasons, these will probably be fewer than in times past?* These are serious questions worthy of serious study.

So, I would suggest that a cohort of 59,000 to 60,000 people totally committed to the quest for God and the promotion of Jesus' Reign in this world is not, on the face of it, an ecclesial disaster, much less a scandal. There are plenty of things to weep over in our Church these days, but women's Religious Life, I would submit, is not one of them. However, that being said, we do have to look seriously at the implications of the age structure of the current population in Religious Life. Obviously, since many of the younger cohort from the 1960s and 70s have left and very few, especially young, candidates have entered in the last three decades, the median age could only go up. The fact that Religious are a significantly older group today than they were in the 1960's is neither debatable nor changeable. The only relevant question, then, is "*What are we to make of this?*" Are American women Religious a dying breed? Will there soon be, as some have quietly and sadly predicted, no Sisters left? In other words, does the rising age of Religious signal the end of the life form?

Interestingly, in the 2011 LCWR national convention, leaders of women's Congregations were not discussing the end of Religious Life, how to negotiate the inevitable demise of their communities. Rather, they were occupied in *discerning in the present situation the signs of new life and figuring out how to foster them*. Is this simply whistling past the graveyard? Once again, some statistical data might be helpful. First, the lifespan picture in the U.S. is changing rapidly and dramatically. We Americans remain psychologically a youth-fixated, age-denying culture which spends an obscene amount of time and money on processes and products that promise to keep us all, like the resurrected in the medieval artistic imagination, perpetually thirty years old. However, the fact is that three-fourths of the American population is now over the age of 18, and a fourth over the age of 55 while life expectancy, which was 49 in 1900 is around 80 today. The median age which was 30 in 1980 is 37 today and rising yearly. (The situation is very different in much of the developing world.) Much more significant, I think, than the actual expansion in years of normal life or even the reversal of the age structure of our society from most of us being in the under-18 population at the beginning of the last century to the

vast majority of us being over 18 today, is the re-envisioning of the life-cycle pattern by geriatricians, developmental psychologists, and cultural anthropologists and sociologists.

Prior to the work of Erik and Joan Erikson the human life-cycle was understood to include four periods: childhood (birth to 12 or so), adolescence (the teen years), adulthood (21 to 50 or so) -- remember when you could get into the movies as a "senior" at the age of 50? -- and old age (50 or so until death, expected around or before 65). Erikson made finer distinctions, discerning seven, and eventually as he himself aged, eight stages or phases of human development, each of which had specific developmental tasks. The recognition of "middle age" as a distinct phase of adulthood, after the 18-40 period of early adulthood and before the old age period of adulthood which Erikson considered to be any time after 50, expanded the understanding of adulthood comparable to the way the recognition of "adolescence" as a distinct stage had expanded the notion of childhood.

Today adulthood has been even more dramatically expanded as life expectancy has increased. Adolescence is followed, we are now told, not by maturity but by "emerging adulthood" which lasts into the early 30's. During this period typical young people put off assuming adult commitments as they prolong their education, travel, add various international and occupational experiences to their resume, experiment with relationships, and float financially, often continuing to live in their parents' home and be carried by their parents' insurance. Early adulthood or "**Adulthood I**" as some students of the subject call it, then extends from the early 30's to 55 or so during which time these young adults make serious commitments such as marriage, having children, buying a home, and establishing themselves in a career.

"**Adulthood II**" begins for most with what used to be called "retirement" at 55 or 60 and runs to 75 or 85 before the onset of old age in the mid-80s or beyond. What the specialists are telling us is that this is usually a period, for healthy people who have been relatively successful in "**Adulthood I**", of financial equilibrium and stable relationships, of vigorous physical, mental, and psychological health and highly-developed skills, of widely expanding interests, of changing and expanding intellectual and/or cultural horizons combined with an interest in making significant contributions to society, and often a time of deepening concern with personal spiritual development. There is increasing consensus among life cycle specialists that retirement is the worst thing these "**Adulthood II**" people can do. Withdrawing into pointless or self-indulgent inactivity which is not genuine leisure but simply bored marking time, leads to rapid physical, psychological, and social decline and a sense of worthlessness. Healthy Adulthood II is often a time of change in pace or rhythm or interests as these senior women and men take on serious new projects and roles but it is not a time of stagnation, of sitting in a rocking chair waiting for death. Some of these seniors go back to school to prepare for socially productive second careers, begin mentoring younger colleagues, lead or serve on the boards of philanthropic enterprises, run for office, or begin to write or paint. Many develop serious interests in their own religious and/or spiritual development and in fostering of that of others.

Dr. Mary Catherine Bateson, the social anthropologist, calls "**Adulthood II**" the "age of active wisdom." In other words, life which used to run from birth to major diminishment in the 60's followed by death, now runs from birth to the late 80's or beyond. During the period from 50 to 80 (or beyond) people today expect to be basically healthy, self-reliant, fully-functioning participants in their life-world. Social expectations of "acting one's age" are rapidly disappearing. Whether it is women having children in their late 50s or a major artistic talent emerging at 65 or a 70 year old running marathons or a 75 year old running for political office or an 85 year old finishing a PhD or a supreme court judge on the bench in his 90s, the expectation that people are finished with life by their late fifties and should get "out of the road" (as the Aussies say), is no longer prevalent or realistic. What does this mean for Religious Life in the first world where life expectancy is 30 years longer than it was in 1900 and the health of people in their 70s, 80s and even 90s is that of a 40, 50, or 60 year old at the turn of the last century? Let me suggest first a short list of implications:

First, it is probably really not desirable that people enter Religious Life before their late 20s or early 30s because they are culturally and psychologically unlikely to be ready for permanent life commitment. They need to finish at least their first post-secondary education, get some serious work experience, and establish some adult relationships beyond the primary family circle. Whatever was the case in 1950, today Religious Life is not for kids. Second, the active phase of Religious Life which used to run from 18-55 or 60 now runs from 30 to 90. The most productive time of that lifespan is likely to be 50 to 75 rather than 35 to 45. And the lay contemporaries of Religious, the majority of Catholics, will be the same age. This means that ministry as well as the spiritual/psychological growth pattern need to be re-examined. Who needs our ministry today? What needs to be done in this social and cultural milieu, in the Church and in the world? Who should be in leadership in our Congregations and how should we prepare them for that role? Do we have to begin thinking about and planning for a “formation for Adulthood II” that would be a standard expectation for Religious who are 55-65 years old and that would normally include not only theological updating and spiritual renewal, personal re-energizing, and re-focusing of interests, but also deep discernment about and preparation for the next stage of ministry?

The Future

Now let us turn to the future of American women’s Religious Life with a focus on ministry. For ministerial (that is, non-monastic) Religious, both as individuals and as communities, ministry has been the area of most profound disruption and disorientation in the post-conciliar period. Some reasons for that will be addressed in a moment. This disruption reverberates in nearly every area of the experience of Religious Life today. It affects community life, congregational finances, visibility in the Church and therefore vocations, and is a major factor in the tensions between Religious and the hierarchy. It may be the area in which the renewal of Religious Life has been most puzzling and even troubling for lay people who were used to seeing Sisters as large groups of women from the same Congregation doing together a single work in a single place and who are now wondering “Where have all the Sisters gone?” Dealing creatively with this issue, ministry in post-conciliar Religious Life, is key to planning for the future. I am convinced, perhaps wrongly but I hope not, of three theses. 1) There will be Religious in the future. 2) They will be adults primarily in the second half of life, which means right now between 60 and 90 with the backbone group in “**Adulthood II**” or their 70s; but hopefully, in the not too distant future, between 40 and 90 with a median age in “**Adulthood I**”, the 50s to 60s. 3) Their ministries, while in continuity with the apostolates of the past, will not resemble in any recognizable way the ministries most people alive today associate with the Sisters of their pre-conciliar experience.

My first thesis is that, for two reasons at least, there will be Religious in the future. First, Religious Life is the oldest vocational lifeform in the Church, dating back to the first century, preceding both matrimony and ordained ministry as public vocations in the Church. And even in its worst times of internal corruption and external persecution, the Church has never been totally devoid of this lifeform. Indeed, it has at times been the best hope of the Church in crisis. Romantic rhetoric to the contrary notwithstanding, Religious Life is more like a sturdy dandelion than a delicate rosebush in the frequently unkempt garden of the Church.

My second reason for believing that Religious Life is not dying is that if we can reclaim and rearticulate our ministerial identity in contemporary terms, which I believe we are in the process of doing, we will become newly visible in the Church. Some will still choose Religious Life in response to a genuine vocation to seek God to the exclusion of any other primary life commitment and to promote the Reign of God in this world with all the energy of their lives. No doubt there will be relatively few such people entering. I doubt we will ever again see a surge like that of the post-World War II influx. But, as the first hundred years of Religious Life in country attests, the vitality of Religious Life and its contribution to Church and world is not a function of numbers. We do not need hordes of novices to scrub miles of

gleaming corridors in giant motherhouses or armies of young nuns to staff the institutions of a ghetto Church defending itself against the world. And it is certainly not our vocation to supply a huge corps of docile unpaid workers for the hierarchy's projects. We need *some* people who will respond to the prophetic vocation to mediate the encounter between contemporary culture and the Word of God, who can inspire and facilitate the engagement of their fellow believers in this task, and who will themselves witness, in life unto death, to the validity and vitality of their distinctive vocation in the Church. My second thesis is that the median age of Religious will drop by a decade or more as more Religious reach higher life expectancy levels in good health and some younger people enter. But I suspect the lifeform will remain, from now on, an adult vocation with the spread being basically throughout "**Adulthood I**" and "**Adulthood II**". Emerging adults are not ready for this life and real old age will tend, the specialists are telling us, to be a very short period at the end of an active adulthood rather than the protracted decline into debilitating fragility that it often is today.

My third thesis and main concern is that we seem to have reached the point at which Religious are ready to appropriate our post-conciliar experience and articulate a new model of ministry which I have called, for lack of a better term at the moment, Sisters Ministries. Most of what I will describe and espouse here is already underway in American Religious Life and has been for a couple decades. But we need to see it more clearly in its wholeness in order to make the decisions necessary to stabilize and promote it.

The only ministerial model for women Religious that most people in the contemporary American Church, including Religious themselves, have ever known is the kind we see in the mid-nineteenth to mid-twentieth century. That period gave us a glorious, inspiring, and astoundingly productive model of large contingents of Sisters engaged in hierarchically governed ecclesiastical apostolates in Catholic institutions such as schools, hospitals, and social service agencies. But this model fitted its time, not ours. **That was then, but this is now.** Interestingly enough, I think what is emerging today resembles more the first century of our history, between 1720 and 1830, when a few hundred Religious in small, widely dispersed groups were doing whatever needed doing for whomever needed it, and with whoever wanted to help than it does the institutional boom period from which we have recently emerged. We need to name, claim, and aim what has been developing in our postconciliar ministerial experience. To whom is our ministry today preferentially directed and what are the emerging and distinctive characteristics of that ministry?

In short, I am proposing that women's ministerial Religious Life has a future in this time and beyond. We will not look today or in the future as we looked in the past -- either in outer appearance, or in age, or in numbers, or in lifestyle, or in ministry. But we will be what we have been since the first century, disciples personally called by Christ to commit ourselves totally to him to the exclusion of any other primary life commitment, and out of that lifelong relationship to participate without reserve in his mission from the One who so loved the world as to give the only Son so that all might not perish but might have eternal life.

FOR REFLECTION & DISCUSSION:

- In what ways do Sandra's reflections resonate with your experiences of Brigidine life and ministry? What are some similarities or some differences?
- "**That was then this is now**" – What do you consider we need most to *name and claim* in our current experiences of ministry in different settings?
- What do you believe are some of the particular challenges and their implications for Brigidines in ministry at this time?