

Apostolic Till the Very End: Theologies of Ministry Among Aging Roman Catholic Sisters

Catherine Sexton

DURHAM UNIVERSITY, DURHAM, UNITED KINGDOM

In the continuing development of the theology of Roman Catholic apostolic religious life, the voices of older women religious no longer engaged in external or paid ministry are rarely heard. This piece explores these women's experiences as they continue to minister Christ to others until the very end of their lives. It suggests that the predominant theology of ministry for religious women needs to be expanded to reflect the sisters' own understandings of ministry as sacramental within the ordinary, incarnational in its expression through their embodied selves, and unrelated to activity.

INTRODUCTION

Roman Catholic sisters in apostolic or active congregations face particular challenges to their identity as they reach the stage in their lives when they are no longer able to continue the forms of ministerial service to others outside their congregations, to which their religious lives have been oriented. This piece explores some of the dilemmas facing these women, formed in a particular understanding of “ministry,” when they are confined by infirmity to being home-based and relating primarily to each other and those who care for them. Drawing on a study I conducted with a group of Catholic sisters aged over 75,¹ I found that, despite no longer being engaged in active ministry outside of their own communities, these sisters find new ways of responding to Sweeney’s “apostolic impulse,” in their continuing journey of conversion towards total self-gift.²

1. Catherine Sexton, “Theologies of ministry among older Roman Catholic sisters in the UK” (PhD diss., Anglia Ruskin University, 2018).

2. James Sweeney, “Religious life Looks to the Future,” in *A Future Full of Hope?*, ed. Gemma Simmonds (Dublin: Columba, 2012), 139–44.

This article explores how these sisters understand and experience their vocational call to express their love of God through a life orientated towards serving others in active ministry. It then explores what meaning they make of a less active life and how that shapes their identity. It presents what I argue to be three emerging forms of ministry, articulated by sisters in several theological expressions, suggesting that the sisters re-shape and develop newologies of what it means to be apostolic in the midst of physical diminishment and limited social engagement.

METHODOLOGY

For the purposes of this study, I interviewed 12 sisters aged between 75 and 95. Four of the sisters were in their 70s; six in their 80s and two in their 90s. Their congregations were of pontifical rite and apostolic or active in character. All five are English foundations and although all have sisters present in other countries and continents, all now have a membership of between 20 and 100 in the UK, with only one receiving new entrants in recent years. Three of the five face closure of their English or European province in the next 20 years or with the death of their current members.

I conducted two rounds of semi-structured interviews with each sister: a full, initial interview and a second interview to discuss my initial analysis. The interviews were held in the setting of each sister's home community, three of these being in more formal care home settings. All were recorded and transcribed by the researcher. Sadly, three of the sisters in the study have since died.

CONTEXT

There are two important contextual factors of relevance to the sisters in the study. The first is the decline in membership of religious congregations in the Global North since the 1950s. This situation and statistical trends are widely documented, and this article does not address the wider question of the collective 'diminishment' of religious life and the difficult situation facing many congregations as they come to completion. However, there is clearly a relationship between the aging and physical diminishment of individual sisters, increasingly a majority of their congregations and what is happening to their congregations. This reality shapes the experience of the sisters in this study in two particular and very concrete ways. The first is the fact that a majority of women religious in the Global North are aged over 75, so that many are aging together and increasingly, in care communities. Furthermore, few congregations have any significant numbers of younger or newer members under the age of 60. Therefore, the generation of women who are aging

now, having served all their lives in these congregations, are one of the first generations to have few, if any younger members still in active ministry behind them, or in a position to care for them. The majority now look to each other or to paid carers to look after them.

The second contextual factor is the nature of the formation this generation of sisters received. This period of training and preparation for final vows, involves formation in the congregation's founding charism, character and spirituality and some theological education. For the sisters in this study, preparation for professional ministry, especially in nursing and teaching orders, would have begun on completion of their Novitiate, during their time in the Juniorate, when they were sent to colleges and universities to train as nurses and teachers.

The word "formation" is used intentionally for, as Carmen Mangion reminds us "The identity of women religious was carefully crafted from their first entry into the convent."³ There are two interrelated aspects of this formation which laid the basis of a task-based identity and shaped how the sisters in this study approach the role of ministry in their later lives. First, they were taught to set their own desires and interests aside, and that only continual self-sacrifice would contribute to the perfection of self and to the sanctification of their own souls, and those of others. This was the dominant theology of religious life before the Second Vatican Council. Second, this setting aside of themselves 'freed' them to dedicate themselves to service to and for others, in imitation of and as apostles of Christ. Sisters were taught to offer their whole lives and selves in service to others. They learned the importance of work—of "doing" for others in Catholic teaching and tradition as well as in their own congregations' charism and patrimony and that an apostolic vocation can only be fulfilled through purposeful roles in active ministry, shaped by a work ethic and a theology of total self-surrender.⁴

The nature of this formation created generations of sisters for whom hard work in the service of others was absolutely at the center of their religious identity. Now, however, many apostolic women religious—particularly the once independent and active elderly religious—find themselves increasingly dependent on others. They are aging, living in a situation of corporate dimin-

3. Carmen M. Mangion, "Laying 'Good Strong Foundations: The Power of the Symbolic in the Formation of a Religious Sister," *Women's History Review*, 16, no. 3 (2007): 403–15. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09612020601022303>. Although relating to nineteenth century England, this approach to formation would have been experienced by sisters in this study and up until the time of the Second Vatican Council 1962–1965.

4. Since the Rule of St. Benedict, written in the sixth century, work has been viewed as central to human dignity and worth, and also serves as one of the seven principles of Catholic Social Teaching.

ishment, decreasing in numbers and influence, and with the future of religious life uncertain.

EMERGING FORMS OF MINISTERIAL RESPONSE IN LATER LIFE, AND THEIR THEOLOGICAL EXPRESSIONS

Traditionally the main “apostolate” ascribed to elderly and “retired” sisters by the church and by their own congregations is that of prayer.⁵ Until recently such sisters would have been expected to understand the primary focus of their less active years as one of praying for the world and its needs, and for the ministries in which the younger members of their congregation would have been engaged. Indeed, in this study prayer was the most commonly identified form of ministry for elderly sisters. Within this, the ministry of “praying for the world” has, in the last decades, been given a new expression, one of on-line activism or remote lobbying on social justice concerns, made possible through internet-based petitions and advocacy platforms.

My study has identified three further expressions of sisters’ understanding of how they minister Christ to others at this stage of their lives, although those who took part did not always accord these the status of ministry. The first of these is a ministry of presence or being actively present to others through relationship. Second is an explicit form of ministering to each other in a new context when the majority of their Province or congregation is of a similar demographic and aging together. The third expression is one of ministering to their carers.

Interwoven with these three forms, I will show how my exploration and interpretation of the sisters’ own words gives voice to several theological expressions of their ministry. The first expression identified is a sacramental ontology. The second is the incarnational and embodied nature of being present, whereby they draw on their converted selves. The last expression is through the raising up of ministering in the ordinary to the realm of the extraordinary. Thus, they demonstrate both a sacramental and relational ontology through which their ministry continues.

In this piece, I use the sisters’ own words but have changed their names to protect their identity and that of their congregations.

5. John Paul II, *Vita Consecrata*, March 26, 1996, 44, http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_25031996_vita-consecrata.html (hereafter *VC*).

MINISTRY OF PRESENCE:
A BEING WITH AND BEING FOR OTHERS

Sisters identify presence as both a “what” and a “how” in that not only is active presence identified as a form of ministry, but it also signifies an ontological orientation towards others.⁶ As such, it permeates and is even constitutive of their relationships with other sisters and their carers. Um writes of the impact religious can have on apostolic ministry simply through their presence: “a contemplative gaze capable of generating communion,” which imbues the situation with an indication of God’s presence and love.⁷

This language of “presence” also represents a coming together across the binary of “being” and “doing” which has so long plagued religious life in the attempt to isolate and define the active and contemplative dimensions of religious life. Martin Poulson, a Salesian priest, in a call rooted in the Transfiguration theology of *Vita Consecrata* (VC, 14–16) suggests that his own generation of religious need to find a way of “crafting anew the language we use about Religious Life so that traditional ways of speaking about contemplation and action can hang together intelligibly once again.”⁸

Poulson seeks to move beyond the unhelpful dualism he identifies by recognizing God’s presence in the interaction between these two modes so that “our being and doing are dynamically interlinked in a reflection of the image of God.” He develops the idea of religious life as a form of presence, partly to address this dualism but also because he understands the very presence of religious in pastoral situations as an important means of demonstrating that people are loved by God (Poulson 2012, 61–2).

Sisters use the language of “presence” in two contexts. The first is in situations encountered where sisters acknowledge that their presence is the only thing they have to offer. This understanding of “presence” recognizes human powerlessness at the times when we are forced to acknowledge the limitations of dependent creaturehood. Second, sisters use the term to denote being present to and listening to those who have no one to listen to them, in a world where, as they perceive it, this is all too common. This also takes on a new

6. In their work Catherine Sexton and Gemma Simmonds, *Religious Life Vitality Project: Key Findings* (London: Heythrop College, 2015), 4, also found the language of ministry of presence, prayer and presence or ministry as presence being widely used among sisters participating in the research.

7. M. Maximilia Um, “Evangelical Mission,” in *The Foundations of Religious Life: Revisiting the Vision*. Council of Major Superiors of Women Religious. (Indiana: Ave Maria Press, 2009): 172–173.

8. Martin Poulson, “Religious Life in the Midst of Creation,” in *A Future Full of Hope?*, ed. Gemma Simmonds (Dublin: Columba, 2012): 56.

poignancy in a context where all are having to adjust to dependency and reduced social influence.

Sisters also describe being “present” as an intentional orientation and openness to the other. This entails an attitudes of availability and of self-gift, and of evangelization: helping to transform others as they themselves long to be transformed. Sr. Pamela explains presence as being for and with others in a full recognition of the other.

To be fully present to the person . . . to be aware, to look at the person, to respect the person for who he or she is, to bring out what is good in that person as well, bring out something positive, and to explore that and develop that within the person’s standpoint.

The First Theological Expression: Towards a Sacramental Ontology

By exploring the sisters’ understanding of “presence,” in theological terms, we can discern in their self-understanding and orientation towards others, the first of several key theological expressions of their ministry: an ontology that is in itself sacramental. A Catholic view of the world locates revelation in lived human experience, conceiving all of humanity and the created world as having the potential to be imbued with and disclose God’s grace. Karl Rahner expressed it thus: “grace . . . always surrounds man [sic], even the sinner and the unbeliever, as the inescapable setting of his existence.”⁹ This perspective helped shape what O’Leary terms Catholicism’s capacity to “reconfigure reality by seeing it through an alternative lens, acquiring a new vision of its graced character” or the sacramental imagination or principle.¹⁰

Susan Ross highlights that this new, post-Conciliar openness to sacramentality has opened the way to revisiting Aquinas’s understanding of sacraments as effecting what they signify—they do or are what they mean.¹¹ If, as Joan Timmerman says, this outward sign “conveys what it contains” then the sisters, through their ministering of Christ through their ministry of presence, are indeed signs.¹² They are signs which point to Christ’s action and presence in the world: communicating that presence and through it, the grace of God. This form of being apostolic through presence can be read as sacramental as it

9. Karen Kilby, *Karl Rahner. A Brief Introduction*. (New York: Crossroad Pub, 2007), 27.

10. Daniel O’Leary, *Begin with the Heart: Recovering a Sacramental Vision* (Dublin: The Columba Press, 2008), 175.

11. Susan Ross, *Extravagant Affections: A Feminist Sacramental Theology* (New York: Continuum, 2001), 141.

12. Joan Timmerman, “The Sacramentality of Human Relationships.” *The Way Supplement* 94 (1999):11.

makes real that which the sisters convey through a lived experience of “knowing relationships as sacramental and oneself as graced by them” (Timmerman 1999, 12).

The Second Theological Expression: Presence as Incarnational

It is evident that the sisters understand and experience their presence as embodying Christ, in an incarnational and embodied expression of their ministry and mission. Ross refers to the “body-denying history of the tradition” (Ross 2001, 15) and proposes a feminist sacramental theology that recognizes and values the embodied reality of life and grace understood as the “integrity and goodness of the physical” (Ross 2001, 51). In her work, women’s lives, experiences and bodies constitute a suitable locus for sacramentality so that “the bodies of women are as revelatory of the divine as are bodies of men” (Ross 2001, 10–13). The sisters in this study seem to embrace and demonstrate an understanding of presence which is concrete in its embodied nature but given meaning by its expression of the presence of God, pointing beyond themselves.

Developing an explicitly evangelical understanding of presence as mutual conversion, another sister in the study, Sr Anne, explains this in strongly embodied and incarnational terms:

. . . simply by being we can be mission. . . . We can be a mission . . . it’s being counsel. . . —incarnation—bearing the gifts and the purposes of God for His people.

This entails drawing very deeply upon oneself, so that the embodied self is a key resource, indicating that sisters bring something to a situation because of who they have become, experiencing the fruits of a lifetime committed to spiritual growth and conversion. With age comes physical and social limitations, but nonetheless, an older sister may have gained greater personal and spiritual resources on which to draw so that being present to, and with, is a coherent expression of being apostolic.

With age revealing the fruits of their lifelong commitment to conversion, the sisters’ self-understanding develops beyond one associated with undertaking defined apostolic activities, towards being apostolic through an embodied presence of self. Sr. Dorothy explained that, for her, “to live the incarnation by being God’s merciful love” is more important than any specific work. Sr. Anne, in describing her being in terms of mission, echoes *Vita Consecrata*, which similarly uses the language of “being” to communicate a highly developed sense of the embodied presence of God (VC, 72). Although not directed as intentionally at those living religious life, the sisters’ words echo and reflect those of Pope Francis in his 2013 apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*.

My mission of being in the heart of the people is not just a part of my life or a badge I can take off; it is not an “extra” or just another moment in life. Instead, it is something I cannot uproot from my being without destroying my very self. I am a mission on this earth; that is the reason why I am here in this world.¹³

Sisters indicate their understanding of the paradox inherent in their ministry: that in being truly present, in being mission, by virtue of being fully themselves as consecrated women, it is not they who are present, but Christ, as experienced by Sr. Beatrice.¹⁴

The presence is the presence of Jesus—that where two or three are, there am I in the midst. That feeling that there is a presence other than who we are. . . . Not because you are anything, but because Jesus in you is everything.

The theology articulated in these perspectives is incarnational. The sisters understand their ministry of presence as incarnating or embodying Christ; being God’s presence; being a channel for God’s grace and being nothing but what and all that God has given them. Sr. Susan explained:

It’s one’s understanding of God’s relationship with us and what God wants for all of us, which is for me the apostolic bit, reaching out to people in Tesco . . . it’s being counsel . . . incarnation—bearing the gifts and the purposes of God for His people.

Sr. Jayne spoke very powerfully of her experience of prison ministry as an example of what Welker described as “the public person of God’s spirit [is] concretized and realized in this communion.”¹⁵ In her interview she described her time in prison ministry as the time when she was most apostolic.

Does it sound awful to say I was God’s presence among these damaged people? That’s what I mean by being apostolic—it’s being, just bringing God to people isn’t it, not so much in words.

13. Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, November 24, 2013, 273, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html.

14. Through the public profession of vows, sisters undergo a second consecration which deepens and strengthens the original baptismal consecration, providing the theological framework for the single-minded following of Christ.

15. Michael Welker, *God the Spirit* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), 311.

Drawing on the Embodied and Converted Self

The sisters' sense of their self as incarnational points to something of the paradox of self-empowerment through self-gift. They have been able both to live self-gift and develop their "self" and to draw on it as a resource. Kate Stogdon recognizes the need "to have an adequate sense of self before one is able freely to give it away altruistically or spiritually" and that this is achieved through the sisters' lifelong commitment, through their religious consecration to God, to an ongoing conversion and transformation of the self.¹⁶ For Stogdon, this is the "the giving of oneself in love to the purposes of God . . . the assent to an ongoing transformation through a radical availability to the divine initiative" (Stogdon 2012, 74). The sisters' commitment to a self-denying love would have brought them to this place recognized as the fruits of their conversion.

Rahner understood grace as God's active self-communication—the giving of God's very self to us (Kilby 2007, 4). The resultant indwelling leads to the gradual transformation or conversion of self, aided in the sisters' case by their vowed commitment, to this embodied following of Christ. Their understanding of their embodied presence is, as we have seen, an active presence, rather than a passive one, and they thus become active communicators of God's own active self-communication to them, and an incarnational manifestation of God's self.

Raising up the Ordinary

The recognition that lived human experience has the potential to be the locus of revelation has opened up "the ordinary" as a grace-filled and sacramental reality and sheds light on the great concern displayed by the sisters in this study with the ordinary. There is a point at which the desire to be and to be seen as ordinary and the understanding of religious life as a distinct life form come together in the sisters' sense of being Christ in the ordinary.

However, mostly the sisters reflect on the ordinary as extraordinary and in doing so, raise up the ordinary, and the prosaic and sanctify it, particularly through the juxtaposition of encounters in the supermarket with being the presence of God, so that even the most apparently mundane becomes sacramental. Sr. Susan identified the need, therefore, to be open to the extraordinariness of God's presence in everyday encounters, describing apostolic as:

16. Kate Stogdon, "Nothing Was Taken from Me: Everything Was Given. Religious Life and Second Wave Feminism," in *A Future Full of Hope?*, ed. Gemma Simmonds (Dublin: Columba, 2012), 74.

A focus on relationship with all who you encounter . . . you have to be aware that every encounter can be a meeting with the divine. . . . I suppose it's a recognition of the presence of the divine in the world, in the very ordinary—the extraordinary as present in the ordinary.

Her words exemplify O'Leary's discussion of Catholic sacramental imagination whereby all experience and relationships can "carry the image of Christ" (O'Leary 2008, 176). He locates the emergence of the ordinary in the Second Vatican Council, stating that "the theology of grace that informs Vatican II recovers 'the ordinary' as the realm of grace . . . hence the aesthetic of holiness is not something exceptional but the same thing that is shaped in the realm of the domestic" (O'Leary 2008, 176). His recognition of "the domestic" has particular bearing on the sisters' contexts of ministering in the ordinary.

Sr. Pamela perceives the ordinary as ministry, as grace-filled, imbuing it with a sacramental meaning, pointing to, and making real, the presence of God. This insight into the sacredness of the ordinary has been formed by her mother's spirituality, and particularly her experience of caring for her dying husband, telling her daughter "I couldn't pray, but everything I did was a prayer."

She could see that her way of praying for my dad was getting his meals ready and looking after him and taking in his cup of tea and being patient when he was being snappy because he was ill. . . . I think my mother found her service in the ordinary things.

She echoes Soskice's call to love and attention in the ordinary, particularly relevant to the orientation of the sisters in this study, through their availability for and to others: "It is by being at the disposal of another that we are characteristically drawn out of ourselves (*ecstasis*) and come to understand ourselves fully as selves."¹⁷

SECOND FORM OF MINISTRY: A MINISTRY TO EACH OTHER IN COMMUNITY

The second expression of ministry identified is articulated in the sisters' responding to a call to be present to and for each other. I identify this as a new realization and in some cases a new experience, particularly for sisters formerly focused on serving those outside their congregation yet now faced with the reality that the majority of their sisters are aging and often in a care community together. When first asked, most sisters did not see caring for each other

17. Janet Soskice, *The Kindness of God: Metaphor, Gender and Religious Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 45.

in community as a form of ministry, perhaps the result of a formation which understood “ministry” or what would have been apostolates, to mean serving those in need, “out there”: those who are not their own sisters. In recognition of this hesitancy, I suggest that there is value in recognising or reframing this as a new form of ministry, as here expressed by Sr. Maeve.

I listen, I hear the pain of people, including my sisters. That is something else—my sisters. . . . That’s new and kind of significant—charity begins at home.

Therefore, caring for each other becomes the primary way in which they live out their vocation. As Sr. Bernadette says of ministry for her time of life.

It’s a ministry inside the house: You can accept that and work on, either with the elderly there in helping care for them or do what you’ve got to do like here with guests. Nevertheless, you’re doing what you have to do but you’re doing it inside the house.

This “ministry inside the house” includes ordinary domestic tasks such as cooking and some cleaning. It also comprises “named” ministries such as preparing and leading prayer, being portress or even “the ministry of the telephone.” Sr. Anne explains the notion of being apostolic until the end of life, in one’s own community.

While I’m physically and mentally able, there are contributions to community living that I can still exercise; there is the ministry of prayer and intercession, and there is the ministry of hospitality. I think we would never retire from trying to be good community members although our external apostolic ministry might well diminish.

So, while, for many sisters, their continuing contribution is framed in terms of carrying out the ordinary domestic tasks of community life, at its heart it comprises being dependent on but in communion with others and accompanying each other on their journey of conversion.

A Relational Ontology: the Sacramentality of Relationships

The sacramental character of a ministry of presence, is seen most fully expressed through the sisters’ relationships with others. Through their being with and being for others, they are signs pointing to and become symbolic of God’s presence for others.

Timmerman draws our attention to the sacramentality in human relationships, where God’s presence is experienced for ourselves. She points to “a theology of God the Spirit understood as the divine immanence present in,

with and under every encounter” (Timmerman 1999, 19–20). Her understanding of the sacramentality of relationships can clearly be applied to the way sisters are present to others and see themselves as being the presence of God to others: “relationship . . . mediates the divine presence and power” not only through ritual but also “the ordinary actions of everyday life” (Timmerman 1999, 10). What she sees as specifically sacramental here is the practical process or experience of “knowing relationships as sacramental and oneself as graced by them” (Timmerman 1999, 12).

Sr. Anne described how, for her, an important part of being apostolic in old age is simply continuing to be an active, contributing, member of her own home community. She has come to understand her apostolic vocation as not simply being in relationship but attending to how that relationship is conducted.

I think to be apostolic is something to do with the way in which we are with people—people who try to follow “the way”—we are people of “the way,” and to be as much as we can Easter people, people of hope; not always easy but that’s the ideal.

Sisters are called to adapt from being the helpers, to allowing themselves to be helped by a sister or a carer through whom a relationship reveals ever more of the face of God. This has particular relevance for this group of women. In an earlier age of religious life, sisters often retired at their Silver Jubilee, and were cared for by younger members. In contrast with this, it is now common for elderly sisters who are still able to live relatively independently, either to remain in their own small community, or to live in care communities which are increasingly comprised of the large percentage of the remaining sisters. This caring for each other in elderly communities can be understood in the context of both vowed obedience and relinquishment.

Edward Vacek understands finding new ways to care for others as one of the moral priorities for an earlier stage of old age, and it is what we see sisters continuing to do in this later stage of life.¹⁸ In this period of increasing dependency, the sisters’ growing self-understanding of being apostolic serves them well as they age. Responding to their situation calls on them to place greater value on “being:” because they can no longer “do,” moving beyond this false separation and coming to a place of great integration.

18. Edward Vacek, SJ, “Vices and Virtues of Old-age Retirement,” *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 30, no. 1 (2010): 161–82.

MINISTRY TO AND FOR CARERS

The third and final expression of ministry in old age considered in this piece is ministering to one's carers. This form of ministry builds on and draws from the two earlier identified forms of ministry: of presence and of caring for each other. Exploring caring for one's carers as a form of ministry offers further insights into the expressions of the relational and sacramental ontology and their sense of an embodied presence that brings Christ to others presented earlier on. This third form comprises an almost complete intertwining of the relational and sacramental aspects, manifested through a near total embodiment, lived out in the realm of the ordinary, yet elevated to the extraordinary.

Relational and Sacramental Ontology

Half of the sisters in the study understand their relationship with those who care for them as offering an opportunity for a very context-specific form of ministry at the end of their lives. Sr. Pamela said of sisters in her care home:

They see that they have an apostolate with the carers; the carers look after them, but they also look after the carers. Whenever there's a carer who has some kind of problem at home, they will find somebody down there who will listen to them.

Sr. Dorothy, at the age of 82, moved into care during the research. Although she was expecting the move to "bring a good deal of diminishment," she actually found that

. . . it's opened up ways of ministry that I'd never imagined, and my biggest surprise . . . the staff are the ones to be enabled and encouraged, and I find this very, very interesting and something that never crossed my mind, but they are all human beings and they have needs and they all love to be listened to, and I just find that quite exciting really.

Sr. Dorothy here names the care home as a community. Her carers are also in need of care and loving attention; they also want to be listened to. She recognized that she is being presented with a new opportunity, to move beyond the binary of the helpers and the helped; the independent and the dependent, in order to minister Christ to her own carers.

Cottingham understands that "our task as human beings is to strive to do what is right, and to live in love and peace with our neighbours" and holds

that being attentive to this task is “the key to true human flourishing.”¹⁹ He rightly asserts that this can apply to any stage of life, irrelevant of physical capacity. He sees love and the self-sacrifice it demands as the ultimate purpose of the human life. Vacek’s concern is how this stage of life can be lived with meaning and purpose, enabling what he terms “completion” to take place, so that people at the final stage of their lives may “come to entrust themselves to Mystery” (2010, 175).

Vacek (2010, 69) views retirement²⁰ as a time which “should first bring to mind . . . new opportunities for serving others” and I argue this is how sisters in the study fulfil their vocation as they demonstrate this orientation to others continuing until the end of their lives. The sisters’ focus on and awareness of the needs of others is present well into old age and its stages of completion or relinquishment. This is evident in the broader way that Sr. Maeve, aged 87, still holds the needs of others in her thoughts and prayers.

Trafficked people, what they suffer . . . and the dangers for them today . . . it is something that I try to get involved in some small way myself, even though at this time in my life . . . but I think it is good to try as much as I can to focus outward.

With age and changed circumstances, the turn towards others becomes more deep-rooted within the self, almost becoming the key element of a sister’s identity, so that through this self, she embodies her mission of ministering Christ to others.

However, at this stage in their lives, it is the sisters’ specific attitude and response to their carers which comprises such a powerful and moving sign which points to the action and presence of Christ in the world. Furthermore, there are echoes of the dynamic mutual conversion seen at work in the ministry to each other, found here in their growing closeness to carers, each accompanying the other on the journey to God.

The Self as an Embodiment of Love for Carers

In perhaps the most challenging question I put to sisters, including those not yet in or needing care, I asked what hopes they had for themselves as they face further loss of independence, potential suffering and eventually their own

19. John Cottingham, “The Question of Ageing,” *Philosophical Papers*, 41, no. 3 (2012): 14.

20. It should be noted that “retirement” is not a word used widely by sisters with whom I have worked.

death. Sisters expressed hope that they would still be turned outwards, still have concern for their carers. Sr. Pamela explains:

I would hope that I would be patient and gracious and that I wouldn't be a testy or demanding patient. And I suppose that would be my ministry; that I would be gracious and caring to whoever was looking after me.

Even on their “bed of pain,” as Sr. Dorothy puts it, they hope to be ready to listen to others, to try to understand their problems, be cheerful with them. Sr. Susan, now finding herself towards the end of her life said:

Sometimes, at the end, when you're helpless and you have to be turned over, what can you do? You can be patient.

She then talked of trying to make herself lighter as she is turned over by a carer. This represents perhaps the most deeply embodied form of “being God's merciful love,” to quote Sr. Dorothy again, and through this, continuing to live the incarnation. It is perhaps more important than any specific ministry, for sisters in this situation now have no ministry apart from themselves; they have become mission as they move towards closer union with God. In the earlier stage in their lives, the sisters' focus on listening attentively to their carers and perhaps problem solving, together. However, in this later stage in their lives, this shifts to a concern to try to reduce the impact of their own illness and physical needs on the carers, to make their work easier—to make the interaction one of love.

In the Realm of the Ordinary

Even at the very end of their lives, the situation in which sisters are called to minister is most ordinary. We may all expect to face dependency at some point in our lives; their situation is not out of the ordinary in any way. However, it is their response which is extraordinary. For many, this stage of life is characterized by personal limitations and discomfort, if not pain, anxiety and suffering. Yet, the women maintain their concern for the needs of others. In this they raise up the ordinary, to become extraordinary, constituting a new articulation of ministry and an increased sense of the sacramentality and grace-infused nature of all stages of life.

Amidst the widespread ordinariness of the experience of aging, Sr. Jayne foresees a new opportunity and role for religious. A friend of hers, now living in a care home is

aiming to spread God's love in a nursing home, being the best you can be in the circumstances, with some inner strength coming from God's

grace and help “and she says to me sometimes; I think this is what we should be aiming at.

As aging and relinquishment now become such a part of the experience of religious life—both on the individual and the corporate level, Sr. Jane suggests that sisters’ ability to minister from within their own experience offers an opportunity for new forms of ministry in secular care communities. This intentional presence may be worth exploring as a form of witness and accompaniment that religious life can offer those struggling with the challenges of old age, particularly in care settings. In recognizing this as a need and opportunity, she takes an ordinary situation and imbues it with mystery, making God real and present, in an intentional form of evangelisation, with oneself and one’s own experience as the instrument of mission.

CONCLUSION

This article identifies and names three expressions of ministry in the later stages of the lives of a group of elderly Roman Catholic religious sisters, in addition to the focus on prayer traditionally considered appropriate for older sisters. These are: a ministry of presence; a ministry of caring for each other and a ministry to carers. I have argued that it is helpful to elevate these aspects of life and being to the status of ministry so as to enhance the deepening sense of purpose and meaning so necessary for the daily living out of vocation into the later stages of life.

I have also presented several theological articulations of these ministries. In the first of these, I identify a relational and sacramental ontology which is central to how sisters understand and express the new ministerial reality of later life. In fidelity to their vowed commitment to others, they remain relational to the ends of their lives, holding and responding to the needs of others even as their own needs increase. They become signs which point to and make real God’s presence and activity among us.

In a second theological expression, sisters come to incarnate and embody their impulse to the apostolic in a form of ministry as intentional presence through their converted selves. They minister Christ to others through and with their bodies and so become both the instrument and the mission. I make a particular claim for the recognition of women’s bodies as a valid locus of sacramentality and of revelation.

Through the third theological expression identified, I argue that recognising the very ordinariness of these ways of being as ministering Christ to others, raises them up and sanctifies the ordinary. Their bearing sign and witness in this way identifies the presence of the extraordinary within the ordinary, as it is filled with the mystery of God.

The sisters have moved beyond a self-definition framed in terms of activity, work and being women who “do.” If aging, when accompanied by reduced physical capacity and social influence, is understood solely in terms of a loss of “doing,” we risk overlooking and undervaluing the consecrated being at the heart of mission. Cardinal Joseph Tobin argues that this connection of “being” with “mission” involves a re-discovery of the understanding of the theological concept of being on mission by virtue of religious consecration.²¹

The sisters’ continuing commitment to live their vocation at the deepest level constitutes a flourishing and fulfilling life. They remain faithful to the apostolic impulse which called them into religious life and to the charism of their congregations. Despite the current reality and indeed future of religious life in the Global North as one of at least numerical diminishment, these sisters are not diminished in theological terms. Rather they subvert dominant narratives about aging women and the diminishment of religious life more broadly.

I have conceptualized the sisters’ active and intentional presence in terms of a relational and sacramental ontology, which offers a way through the false dichotomy of being and doing in which they have often been schooled. Their being with and being for others is captured in a symbolic understanding of the sacramental whereby the symbol makes real that which it symbolizes. They become more than signs, pointing towards, but take on a symbolic presence which not only integrates being and doing but enacts the nature of God’s self-communication and makes real the indwelling they inhabit.

Catherine Sexton is an assistant professor (research) at the Centre for Catholic Studies at the University of Durham. She has been researching and writing about the theology and other aspects of contemporary religious life for women on several continents for the past ten years. She can be reached at catherine.m.sexton@durham.ac.uk.

21. Joseph Tobin, “How did we get here? The renewal of religious life in the Church since Vatican II,” in *A Future Built on Faith*, ed. Gemma Simmonds (Dublin: Columba, 2014), 19–43.