

Religious Life as an Antidote to Toxic Polarization

Fr. Aaron Wessman, GHM

Originally published in Review for Religious online, May 6, 2026

In this essay, Fr. Aaron Wessman, GHM argues that Catholic religious life offers a practical antidote to toxic polarization, highlighting how community life, diverse charisms, and collaboration foster unity amid difference. Drawing on personal experience, he presents religious communities as imperfect but hopeful models of coexistence in a divided society.

Religious Life as an Antidote to Toxic Polarization

I am living with cognitive dissonance. [Told that](#) the United States is deeply divided, I nevertheless regularly encounter situations that make me question this thesis.

As a missionary priest and member of a religious order within the Catholic Church, the world I inhabit in my ministry and daily life does not track well with the world I witness on the news, often see on social media, or sometimes hear described by many politicians.

The latter regularly [depict](#) a world of toxic, seemingly insurmountable divisions. In this world, on account of the threat posed by the so-called other—the racial, religious, partisan, or cultural other—the only recourse one has seems to be to gather with like-minded people and to construct a fortress impregnable to fight against and hopefully destroy those who are ruining all that is sacred. It's a bleak, dark picture. In this world, the United States is perilously close to civil war.

To be sure, I [know](#) that there are real, painful divisions in this country. I've spent much of the last three years speaking to dioceses, religious orders, and parishes on the theme of polarization. I've heard personal stories describing heart-wrenching

estrangements that left listeners in tears. My home state is Minnesota, and we [saw](#) the tragic events in Minneapolis this year.

But I cannot deny the evidence that being part of religious life allows one to swim not primarily in the mire of rancor and hostility, but instead in the murky but navigable waters of unity amid tensions, disagreements, and diversity. And though Catholic religious do not monopolize the grace of unity and communion, and are far from living these perfectly, religious oftentimes do live up to their calling to be "[experts in communion](#)". Because of this, religious life provides a unique antidote to toxic polarization.

Here are three ways that this is the case.

A Commitment to Community

Nearly every form of religious or consecrated life calls its members to enter the depolarizing logic of communal living. Little in religious life is more difficult. I speak from experience. I live with more than a dozen other members of my community, differentiated by generations, cultures, languages, and preferences. We often cannot agree upon how to wash the dishes, where to park our vehicles, what temperature to set the thermostat, how to recycle, or even how to pronounce certain words in prayer.

But the beauty of our situation—which is a value I witness in religious life across this country—is that we try to live in harmony even as we share many differences. To do this, each of us must accept an undeniable reality: we don't always (we can't always) get our way. We must negotiate everything—even the mundane—from what brands of food or soap we buy to when we turn on the lights for prayer.

Beyond the seemingly banal, religious also strive for the ideal of communion in many profound ways. We pursue [interculturality](#)—creating something new out of our many cultures—rather than forcing the few to submit to the majority. We explore and wrestle with generational preferences, whether in liturgy, music, or theology. Disagreements exist, but we strive to cultivate structures and practices so

that these don't induce fractures or worse. We have meetings and more meetings (and more meetings) to share perspectives; seek compromise; let go of or at least soften our personal idiosyncrasies. And we say we are sorry, again and again, especially in the liturgy.

No doubt living with—and even enjoying—difference, is strengthened by our common faith in Jesus and the sacred oaths or vows we make. And these latter do limit the extent to which we can entertain every form of diversity. But we who live in religious communities—whether big or small—should not take our efforts at communal living for granted. They are a gift to a divided world. Religious life does not merely gather those already inclined toward harmony; it forms its members in habits of patience, negotiation, and mutual dependence that make unity possible over time. In this sense, it functions not simply as a refuge from toxic polarization, but as a school in learning how to live with difference without turning it into rupture.

Our efforts of overcoming division don't end with our communal living. They extend to the gift of our unique charisms.

The Gift of Charism

Most religious reading this essay have likely attended a vocation promotion conference or a large, national Catholic gathering, such as NCYC or SEEK. One thing that stands out to me at every one of these events I attend is the gift of 'charism.' This gift is usually visible, where dozens or even hundreds of booths are staffed with as many religious or consecrated members, all sharing their unique way of life with passersby. I think the reality of many charisms living within as many religious orders in the Church is one of the ways that the Holy Spirit seeks to safeguard the unity of the Catholic Church. How so?

First, charisms allow the Body of Christ to lean into—or perhaps better, to obsess about—a particular aspect of the Gospel while not expecting every single breathing Catholic to do so. If you want to live abject poverty, have no money in the bank,

wear no shoes or socks, and beg for every meal: Great! Join some variety of the Franciscans. If you want to live your entire life in rural America, working around more Southern Baptists than Catholics, and do so where there is no established Catholic parish: Wonderful! Join the Glenmary Home Missioners. If you want to dedicate your entire life to providing the Traditional Latin Mass: Perfect! Join the Fraternal Society of Saint Peter.

But there is no expectation that every single Catholic must live exactly as we do.

I often witness dedicated men and women religious in other communities (and I suspect they see this in me as well) living a charism that would be the last thing I would choose for myself. But that is the gift of charism: my disinterest does not in any way discredit their passion. And their passion does not mean that my disinterest makes me less Catholic.

Charisms allow us to live something passionately and without reserve while cautioning us from saying: "You are only Catholic if you do as I do." Not every Catholic is called to every charism. But the Church is nevertheless called to unity in and through the existence of these charisms.

The second gift of charism is that it propels members and co-members of an institute to cultivate communion with certain subgroups—often marginalized—in creative, gifted ways. From migrants on the border, to disaffected Catholics, sexual minorities, and the homeless in urban areas—wherever there is a peripheral group there will almost certainly be a religious institute standing with them. The charisms of religious communities motivate members to accompany those subsections and draw them into deeper unity through the special gifts handed down by a founder.

This last November, I [witnessed](#) this firsthand at a conference on deepening communion in a polarized world that the Glenmary Home Missioners co-organized with the monks and staff of St. Meinrad, with members of the community of the Focolare, and with others.

Alone, to be sure, Glenmary would not have been able to organize and carry out this event. Yet with Glenmary's commitment to 'cross over' to 'the other'; the

Benedictine gift of hospitality and moderation; and the Focolare commitment to move toward the pain of division to bring about unity with the grace of God, this conference was a resounding success.

It drew a diverse group of people from all over the United States who had been affected by—and sometimes even suffered because of—the divisions around them. Some of these people were carrying significant emotional pain. But quite shockingly, even with these intense experiences and emotions, people laughed, shared stories, spoke vulnerably, and remained hopeful. I witnessed not a Church ripped apart and dying, but one healing and being healed, united and living with our tensions, serious about our challenges but willing to laugh with joy because of our shared faith.

At least for myself, I can say that I most likely would not have been involved in such an endeavor without my formation in the charism of Glenmary. I suspect the other religious involved share this sentiment. Our charisms nudge and sometimes cajole us to deepen communion with a wounded Church and world even when it seems humanly impossible.

The grace of charism uniting religious together to deepen unity leads to another way in which I see religious life serving as an antidote to toxic polarization: our commitment to collaborate with other religious for the sake of the greater Kingdom of God.

Commitment to Collaborate

In the spirit of full disclosure, I've had the pleasure of serving on the Board of the [Conference of Major Superiors of Men](#) (CMSM) for the last 5 years. Even though I may be biased, the collaboration I witness between religious institutes, facilitated by the existence of CMSM, is second to none in the Church.

Take CMSM's national assembly, typically held every year in July. This gathering brings together hundreds of major superiors, councilors, vocation directors, members of institutes, and ordinaries from around the United States and world.

Attendees are young and old, dressed in habits and in Hawaiian shirts, folks who prefer traditional liturgies and others who prefer something more basic, domestic and international, monks and missionaries, and so much more. As one member joked: “The national assembly is the unique and only venue for male religious where you can find a Jesuit and Legionnaire of Christ sharing a drink at happy hour and witness them both erupting in mutual joy and happiness.” Of course, this pattern of collaboration would not exist within CMSM without a broader instinct within religious communities to face common challenges together rather than retreat into institutional silos.

Beyond the experience of the national gathering, the gift of collaboration can also be judged by its fruit—the ability of religious to reckon with and provide remedies for challenges and crises. In no instance in the last half century has this been more apparent as when religious faced the Church’s sexual abuse crisis.

Nearly every member of CMSM is aware of the [history](#) of the tragic unfolding of the Church’s sexual abuse crisis erupting in the early 2000s. Few at that time could have predicted that such a systematic, grave problem could have been reckoned with. Still fewer that real, structural changes would come to religious life that would seek to safeguard the most vulnerable.

And yet, it was in large part, because of the collaboration of religious institutes facilitated by CMSM that religious communities would go on to adopt and implement [safeguarding](#) standards to protect minors. The result has been a significant [reduction](#) in new occurrences of the sexual abuse of minors by members of religious institutes and clergy within the United States. To be sure, these changes do not erase the Church’s catastrophic moral failure. One case of abuse is one too many. But these efforts of collaboration have moved the Church toward better safeguarding the dignity of all people—especially the vulnerable.

Catholics, including religious themselves, are far from perfect. This hardly needs saying. And our attempts at collaboration sometimes are strained. But when other institutions today in the American context are unable to pursue and implement ideals because of toxic polarization, whether in Congress’ decades-long inability to pass immigration reform, the endless threat or realization of government

shutdowns, or the lack of structural, external scrutiny of America's elites which has been [revealed](#) through the 'Epstein saga', religious communities, with God's grace and through their commitment to collaborate, have been able to address systematically some of the most difficult challenges of the age. This witness to the transforming power of collaboration, especially in divided times, is a true gift of religious life today.

Conclusion

Does religious life provide a panacea for the divisions existing within American society today? Of course not. But this does not deny that, in many ways, religious life vibrantly presents a different kind of living to a divided world: one of a commitment to community, one of mutually enriching charisms ordered toward unity, and one of collaboration.

These efforts are exactly what the United States needs from us. Where do we see the unity that Christ desires for the world? I think that very often we can point to religious and respond: "There it is! There is an antidote to toxic polarization."

You may find the original posting of this essay, as well as the author's biographical and contact information, at <https://www.reviewforreligious.com/essays/Religious-Life-as-an-Antidote-to-Toxic-Polarization/>.