Sociology and Religious Life: A Retrospective

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Theologians and philosophers say that, as we age, we should look back reflectively on our lives. What was the main goal or focus to which we have devoted our time on this earth? Did we help to make the world—or at least some little part of it—better in any way?

I do not know if I will ever get around to reviewing my entire life, but this invitation to write a retrospective reflection on my research was the "nudge" I needed to start. So, I spent the past summer re-reading and reflecting on the books, book chapters, articles, and research reports, dating back to 1983, in which I have applied my discipline of sociology to Catholic religious life. I hope that both my works and this reflection will help some permutation(s) of religious life to survive and thrive in the twenty-first century—if they do, it is more the work of the Holy Spirit than my own.

When I was a student at the University of Chicago's Graduate Sociology Program, it was required of all of us to complete an extensive reading course introducing us to the discipline. One of the books on our reading list was a study of an intentional Hutterite community in upstate New York called the Bruderhof (Zablocki, 1980). The author was interested in the internal practices and rituals that motivated the community's members to enter and remain in it. I realized that many of these practices strongly resembled those of Catholic religious orders in the past. I had not thought of studying my own congregation, or religious life in general, sociologically. It had not really been done before: a few studies were beginning to use sociology to look at the *ministries* of religious orders, but not at *the orders or congregations themselves*. In contrast, religious life by the 1980s had benefitted from several decades of applying psychology to both the ministry and the ministers. Leaders and formation directors no longer expected the members of their congregations to strive for spiritual perfection, realizing that none of us are, or can ever be, pure spirits. We all have "growing edges" that the insights of psychology can help us address. But our communities are composed of these very fallible human members. Could they not benefit from the application of sociology in the same way that they had from psychology? I began tentatively to write articles for *Review for Religious* and elsewhere, pointing out some areas where sociology could shed light on religious life (45, 44, 43, 42), but I got intense pushback from some readers who objected to applying a secular discipline to a spiritual calling. One

critic asked readers if a religious congregation could *really* be compared to a nonprofit organization, a business corporation, or a commune, implying that this was illegitimate academic exercise (42, p.105). These criticisms were discouraging. In 1987, however, I attended the American Sociological Association's annual meeting, where I heard its president urge us not to confine ourselves to writing theoretical articles and books solely for an audience of other professors, but instead to make our findings accessible to the people who could actually use them (Gans 1988). I saw this as a validation of my initial efforts. After that, it became the primary focus for my research and writing.

Sociological Insights for Religious Life

In my first article in *Review for Religious*, published in 1983, I listed several areas where sociological research on other groups and organizations could help explain some of the patterns in how religious orders and congregations develop, adapt, and change (45). Knowing the causes and results of similar developments elsewhere, I argued, could help the leaders and members of religious institutes better address the situations in their own communities.

Explaining Periods of Growth and Decline

By 1980, historians had shown that religious life in the Catholic Church experiences recurring waves of growth and decline (Hostie, 1972; Cada, 1979). Most religious were aware of their writings and recognized that we were at the end of a growth/beginning of a decline period that had begun in the nineteenth century. But what caused these cycles? And what could/should be done to ride out the current one? Perhaps an answer could be gleaned from the sociological study of similar cycles in other religions.

A famous early sociologist (Weber, 1958:287) said that all religious traditions have to provide outlets for the desire of their most fervent members to make more progress in their spiritual or religious life. Not all Buddhists, Hindus, or Shiite Muslims—or Christians—are able to devote their entire lives to whatever beliefs and practices their tradition deems most holy, nor do most of them want to. But some do. If a religion does not have a way for its "religious virtuosi" to live their call, they will seek it elsewhere, and their original religious tradition will be poorer once they have left (26).

There was an entire field of sociological research, I knew, that could readily be applied to the cycles of growth and decline in Catholic religious orders: the study of religious social movements. As societies change, the attitudes and beliefs prescribed or recommended by a religion may become "out of sync" with the deepest hungers of its followers. The most committed members (its religious virtuosi) will feel this first. Pressure for a new way of meeting the

needs of the times will build up, often causing an explosion of rapid growth when a new spiritual way is found. A struggle may then ensue between the followers of the new version and the leaders of the established religion over whether the new way is an authentic version of the faith tradition or a heretical variant. At such a time, the resources the followers/leaders of the new version can access and mobilize may determine their success or failure (34).

I wanted to show the parallels between the life cycles of other religious social movements and the growth and decline cycles of Catholic religious life. As the surrounding society suffered political upheavals, or as urbanization, industrialization, and migrations altered its social and economic landscape, older versions of religious life no longer spoke to the spiritual and physical needs that many religious virtuosi felt. Some developed new theologies promoting different activities or beliefs as *the* way to follow God's call. Under the influence of these new beliefs and practices, newer and more appealing versions of religious life arose to take the place of the old (38, 34, 32, 31, 26). As with other religious social movements, these new versions were initially resisted. Some were not able to marshal sufficient resources to win the support of the Church hierarchy and/or of powerful lay patrons, and they eventually either died out or were repressed (33, 19). Others with access to these resources survived and thrived.

After the exponential growth of its foundation period and a longer period of stabilization, a particular cycle's religious orders will decline. Sometimes the decline will be due to the gradual loosening of the internal commitment mechanisms which sociologists have found to be essential to the survival of other intentional communities (44, 37, 34, 26, 10 ch.6). At other times, external factors will decrease the likelihood of new recruits entering and/or the ability of the community to survive financially. Political support, from government or Church sources, may also be lacking. At the end of a cycle, two-thirds of the religious orders founded at the beginning of the cycle become extinct (Cada et al, 1979:66). But the hunger for "something more" remains within the Church. The cultural discontinuities between the Church and the larger society's needs continue to increase. When, and if, a new version of religious life develops, and if sufficient resources are available for its promulgation and spread, the cycle will begin again.

Generational Change

Another feature of religious life which could be illuminated by sociology is the change that occurs with the addition of a new generation of members. The differences between successive generational cohorts had fascinated me since I wrote my M.A. thesis in 1979. According to a seminal essay by sociologist Karl Mannheim, our outlook on life is shaped by both the society and

culture we grew up in and by the particular political, economic, and societal events that were occurring when we achieved cognitive maturity as young adults (Mannheim, 1952). For my M.A. thesis, I applied his generational theory to the political leanings of Americans who became young adults in the 1930s, 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s. Later, however, I realized that there are *Church* generations, too. The "Pre-Vatican II Generation"—Catholics who passed both their childhood and early adulthood before Vatican II—have different expectations of the Church than the "Vatican II Generation," who passed their childhood in a similar religious environment but experienced the changes of Vatican II in their teenage and young adult years. Religious from the Vatican II Generation welcomed the changes in religious communities that were initiated after the Council, changes that were often difficult for the members of the previous generation. However, subsequent generations of Catholic young adults have no memory of pre-Vatican II Catholicism or pre-Vatican II religious life. As a result, they have different desires and expectations than their elders had. These differing generational outlooks have affected their willingness to enter religious life and the kind(s) of orders or congregations that attract them. In collaboration with researchers from the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA), I have written several articles and book chapters on how young women who enter religious life today differ from entrants fifty or more years ago (43, 30, 11, 9). We continue to write about this: our most recent book, *God's Call is Everywhere*, studies generational differences among entrants in nine different countries. (2)

Cultures

For sociologists, "culture" is much more than celebrating Cinco de Mayo, singing Stille Nacht at Christmas, or eating pierogis. It includes *behaviors*, such as how one is expected to walk, talk, or make eye contact, as well as whether/when to use jokes, slang, gossip, and jargon. The *value* dimension of culture includes shared definitions of what is right/wrong, beautiful/ugly, desirable/undesirable. How much emotional expression is desirable at religious services? Which should take preference, and when: one's family obligations or one's ministry obligations? The deepest dimension of culture is *cognitive* culture, which refers to shared definitions of reality. How do we determine what is true? Is human nature basically good, neutral, or bad? Is it fixed or can it be improved? What beliefs "go together"? (Can someone be a feminist and still prefer the Tridentine Latin Mass?) Cultures differ from ethnic group to ethnic group, from one socioeconomic class to another, and across generations. The more distant one culture is from another, especially in its behavioral, value, and cognitive dimensions, the more difficult it will be for their members to understand each other.

In the past, many religious orders and congregations in the United States were primarily composed of members from a single ethnic culture. Members who did not come from the dominant ethnic group of the community often felt like second-class citizens. Some even broke away and formed a new congregation of their own: French-speaking Canadian sisters from Irish-Canadian congregations, Polish-American sisters from largely German-American congregations, etc.

Is it desirable or even possible for a congregation to be really intercultural? Many religious today hope so because they believe interculturality would enrich their charism and be a model for the larger society, which is so often divided into mutually antagonistic ethnic, class, or racial groups. But living interculturally is often difficult. Collaborating again with CARA, I have helped write several books on the kinds of issues and questions that religious communities must face in order to be successfully intercultural in their membership and, equally importantly, in their leadership (4, 3, 2). What are some of the issues and challenges involved when an order or congregation transitions to leaders from different cultures, as so many international orders are doing today?

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

In addition to making some relevant concepts and theories from sociology available to religious orders and congregations, I also wanted to give some examples of specific dilemmas or questions that religious are facing today and how sociology might help in addressing them.

Leadership as Administration

The administrative tasks of a congregation's leadership are often disparaged as merely "keeping the trains running on time" without asking where the trains should be going in the first place or, worse, as "rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic" as the ship sinks. Instead, "prophetic" and "pastoral" leadership styles have been recommended as better models for leaders in religious life. In two articles in *Human Development,* however, I tried to show how administrative leaders could perform a valuable service in delegating, facilitating, and orchestrating both the prophetic calls of its visionary members toward new horizons and the pastoral desires of its members to connect more deeply with each other (21). Such administrative leadership is key when several institutes with similar charisms reconfigure into a single entity (13).

The Effects of Ministry Change(s)

Apostolic religious orders and congregations live out their Divine call, in whole or in part, through their ministries. When the types and locales of these

ministries change, this will often have unforeseen side effects for the order or congregation itself. One side effect that became evident to me relatively early in my academic career stemmed from noticing the difference between serving in a school, hospital, or other institution that was owned and/or operated by one's own congregation compared to work settings where one is a simple employee, subject to the same bureaucratic rules and (possibly misogynistic or arbitrary) bosses as everyone else. I found that, at least for women religious, it was often a shock when they faced discrimination and power imbalances in their new work settings that they had not experienced as leaders of their own institutions (41, 40, 35).

Other impacts, less obvious but no less real, also flowed from ministry changes, especially for women religious. As sisters moved out of their congregation's schools and hospitals and into individualized and more widely scattered ministries, they were less likely to be able to live together in larger groups. Looking in the archives of several congregations in the early 1990s, I discovered that, in comparison with previous decades, sisters were increasingly likely to live in groups of two or three, and usually within the same stable community composition, for decades on end. (39, 36) This made it much more difficult for formation directors to find suitable houses for new entrants. Still another unexpected impact from ministry changes was on the order's identity. In a 1998 article in *America* magazine, I argued that religious often had difficulty articulating the distinctiveness of their congregational charism once their institutional ministries no longer defined them (30). Ministering in scattered locations also meant that members became both less aware of the leadership capacities of other members and less able to mentor new members into institutional leadership (20, 23, 22, 21). Of course, this assumed that new members even *wanted* to lead their order's hospitals or schools: the new generations of women entering religious life today have different desires and expectations that center more on community living and prayer (29). Will they seek to fulfill them in established religious congregations or look elsewhere?

New and Emerging Religious Communities

The cyclic pattern of growth, stabilization, decline/demise, and rebirth that historians have noted in Catholic religious life, as well as the sociological research on other religious social movements, would seem to predict that a new wave of religious communities will soon be founded, and that its version of religious life will differ in some respects from those of the preceding cycle. Is this happening yet? Over the past three decades, I have worked with CARA compiling three editions of a directory of emerging religious communities and lay movements in the United States (28, 27, 18, 17, 12, 8, 7, 6). For each directory, we contacted all 195 dioceses and eparchies in the United States

and the Virgin Islands asking for the names and addresses of any new or emerging religious communities or lay movements that had been founded or moved into their jurisdiction since 1965. We asked them *not* to include groups that were founded and headquartered in other countries, even if they had a presence in their diocese. All told, each of the directories had between 140 and 170 entries. But they were not always the same communities. Thus, we were able to track which new communities had survived and grown between 1999 and 2017, which had stagnated without expending, and which had diminished or disappeared altogether. We could also determine what charisms, lifestyles, and apostolates were most represented in the new communities. We found that they were more likely to prioritize common living, prayer, and contemplation over ministry, and that the Franciscan, Benedictine, and Carmelite spiritual traditions were the most commonly reported—although a large percentage claimed to have an entirely new charism. When a new community reported having an active ministry, it was more likely to be evangelization or conducting retreats, and much less likely to be teaching, health care, or social work. The majority of the new communities were of vowed women or men only, but a significant minority (26% in 2017) were lay movements containing both male and female members, not all of whom professed religious vows.

Having directories in 1999, 2006, and 2017 also enabled us to compare the specific characteristics of communities that had grown, as compared to those that had stagnated or declined. Between the 2006 and 2017 directories, 29 of the communities dissolved; another 41 had either declined in membership or stayed the same size. Of the remaining 43 communities, 23 had grown only slightly. Only 20 had increased by more than 50%. In contrast, many of the new religious communities founded in the nineteenth century at the beginning of the previous cycle had at least doubled in size within their first ten years. A few had increased tenfold. The currently emerging communities, therefore, do not appear to be the forerunners—yet—of the next growth cycle of religious life.

"Hard Questions"

The findings of my research on generations, ministry, and new communities pose some important questions for religious orders and congregations in the United States today. Fortunately, they may also suggest some possible directions to look for answers. The questions first.

The Rise of the "Nones"

A key characteristic of Millennial (born between 1981 and 1995) and "Generation Z" (born after 1995) young adults is the increasing percentage of

them—at least one-third of Gen Z—who claim no religion at all (Cox, 2022). This is especially true of young women (Cox and Hammond, 2024). In fact, religion has somewhat of a "bad reputation" among many young adults, with connotations of rigidity, intolerance, and fanaticism (Cox, 2022; Bullivant, 2022). In many countries of the global north, there is an increasing peer pressure on the young to *not* be religious. At the same time, the number of religious has declined so that they are rarely seen. If women religious are visible at all, it is in the media or the news, where they are depicted (in the United States) as "elderly sisters in wheelchairs," or (in Mexico and France) as "walled up in monasteries . . . fleeing from the difficulties of daily life" which they cannot handle (2 p.83-84). Based on these depictions, who would ever consider joining such a group? Vocation directors also cite the increasing individualism of young adults that makes it hard for them to adapt to the give and take of community life, in addition to the constant din of electronic media that makes it difficult to pray. And yet studies of the young describe their increased loneliness, pessimism, anxiety, and even despair (Cox, 2022). Is this the kind of spiritual hunger that a new cycle of religious life could address? Or is our society already too secular for the young to consider joining a religious order as a possibility?

Internal Identity and Raison d'Etre

A second question, therefore, is whether and how religious orders and congregations can adapt to answer the deep malaise of today's young adults. But this is likely to require religious orders to adapt their lifestyles, their charism, and their very identity to address these new needs. Re-founding a religious community is, as I have long noted (38, 37, 33), extremely difficult. There has never been a re-foundation that did not bring with it internal opposition and even schism, as St. Teresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross could certainly testify (Hostie, 1972:51). And, so far, most attempts to found entirely new versions of religious life do not seem to be succeeding in anything like the same degree as those founded at the beginning of previous cycles, although this may, of course, change. The most common response, so far, to the disjuncture between their long-accepted identity or activities and the new spiritual hungers of today seems, for many congregations, to be either merging or "coming to completion," something I had predicted several decades ago (42, 38). Such a choice is *not* a blameworthy decision; indeed, it can give a truly inspiring witness. In the secular world, an organization's leaders *never* say, "Well, we have finished our task. Let us spend our remaining resources for the good of others and dissolve the business." But, many congregations are doing exactly that. In their continued outward focus on the poor and marginalized, their completion presents an inspiring icon of the redemptive death of Christ.

SUGGESTIONS FOR THE FUTURE

I admit, however, to a hope that not all the current congregations will choose the path of coming to completion. Religious life has been an essential part of Catholicism for millennia, and I believe it will continue to be. But our secularized, materialistic, and pervasively electronic society makes the call to vowed life difficult, if not impossible, to hear. So I have, from time to time, made some suggestions, based on my own sociological background, for how current and future religious institutes might survive, and provide a much-needed answer to today's spiritual (if unrecognized) searching:

- *Tell our story:* First, both young and old in our society need to be aware of the manifold beauties of religious life, and to know that it does, in fact, offer answers to much of the spiritual and material suffering so many experience today. We need to tell our story to the whole of our culture, not just to those who might consider joining us. I remember once hearing, with horror, a young seminarian say, "I don't know why we need sisters. They've never done anything!" This ignorance cannot continue. It is vitally important to preserve the archives of religious communities and make them available to researchers and historians who can make their contents as widely available as possible (5). Other ways of spreading the news of what religious currently do, and what they did in the past, are also vitally important: books, TV and film, music and art, websites and electronic media.
- *Research the desires of each generation and take them seriously:* Each generation will experience religion in general, and Catholicism in particular, differently. They will have different frustrations and hungers that previous versions of religious life may not answer. But since no generation's members are monolithic in their spiritual searching, there should ideally be several different versions of religious life to appeal to their calls (1). Traditionalist religious orders already exist and appeal to the subgroup of Millennials and Generation Z that value theological clarity and the spiritual mysticism of older devotions and liturgies (29). This is a valuable and needed version of religious life. But most young seekers are not called to it. What other charisms can we offer them to answer their calls?
- *Intentionally recruit:* The days are long past in our secular Western cultures when entering a religious order was a common and valued life choice that was followed by numerous young men and women without being urged to do so. In one of my early books, I argued that all religious should be tithing their waking hours to inviting, directly or indirectly, young adults to consider our life (32 ch.6). I still believe

this. We also need to research what family, church, and other background factors are the most likely to influence religious vocations and what ways of inviting are the most helpful. With several other CARA researchers, I collaborated on a book outlining the role of families, college experiences, and volunteer and associate programs on vocations to religious life (7).

- *Foster Seeds:* I have often felt that the call to religious virtuosity is like crabgrass: it can germinate, initially at least, in the hardest and most inhospitable ground. But the question is whether the seed can be fostered, protected, and helped to grow. How might religious communities plant new seeds themselves, and/or help the already planted ones survive and grow? Many orders and congregations still have one or two members who ardently desire to devote their energies to a specific ministry or spiritual practice. They may have already been doing so for years. How can their enthusiasm be celebrated, nourished, and linked to others, inside their community or outside it, who have the same call? What resources would this "seed group" need to survive at least long enough to see if it will flourish on its own? What arrangements would need to be made for ongoing mentoring of their efforts? A consistent and long-held theme of my writing, from my very first book to the present, has been that we need *several varieties of religious life* to meet the multiple and various spiritual hungers and societal needs of today (37, 32, 13, 1). We do not know what particular version(s) will grow, so we need to plant and foster as many seeds as we can and provide a safety net and place of healing for the ones that will inevitably not work out. We can learn from failed attempts as much as from successes.
- *Develop Communal Discernment Practices:* A peculiarity of American culture (and, to a lesser extent, of other Western cultures) is excessive individualism. This is not unique to religious life; it pervades all of American culture. Often, we do not even have the words to describe what is missing or to notice its absence. For example, the US Constitution devotes extensive space to the rights of the individual vis a vis the states and the Federal Government, but *not a single word* to the rights of communities like families, cities, or neighborhoods. Until very recently, economists wrote volumes on the ways nations or societies prospered (macroeconomics), and more volumes on how individuals make financial decisions (microeconomics), but little on the economics of groups or communities. Similarly, those who have written about religious life have been more likely to analyze it from the perspective of its positive or negative effects on the individual sisters, brothers, and religious order priests, and less likely to look at what might help the *community itself* to thrive.

I pointed this out in one book and several articles (14, 13, 10). For example, I did a preliminary comparison of the number of articles on individual spiritual practices as compared to communal ones that appeared in four different publications between 2004 and 2010.[1] There were 54 articles on individual discernment practices but only one article that addressed the need for similar *communal* discernment practices. There were 57 articles on spiritual practices to help individuals suffering from chronic illness, stress, bereavement, or depression, but only two articles on how to ameliorate group stress (10 p.159). Again, this reflects the "institutional blank" in our larger culture: we find it hard to even imagine what kinds of questions a communal discernment might involve. As one perceptive Jesuit observed, his local community's communal examen tended to slip from "ourselves *as* the community" to "*oneself in* the community" (Shano, 2009:252). In my 2012 book *Building Strong Church Communities*, I gave examples of the kinds of questions we need to ask about the health and needs of our communities, in addition to the questions we are used to regarding individual discernment (10 p.141). Our communities could greatly benefit from communal discernment as we choose our future paths.

CONCLUSION

In the coming years, our nation, and all nations around the world, will be faced with mounting crises: the widening gap between the rich and the poor, ecological collapse and climate disasters due to global warming, mass migrations from war and famine-torn countries, increasing divisions fueled by mass media disinformation, and the pervasive loneliness, anxiety and depression arising from all these calamities. We have had to learn new vocabularies for these stresses: ten or twenty years ago, would we have even known what a "failed state" was? Or "suicides of despair"? I believe that never has there been a time when religious life has been more needed. But just because it is needed does not mean it will rise again. Several times in recent history there have been similar societal strains, but people found other causes and organizations to answer their frustrations, answers that often led to disastrous results. The crises in Europe following World War I and during the Great Depression led to the rise of totalitarian governments in Germany, Italy, and Spain and a second World War. Today, we see so many young people losing themselves in addiction, whether to drugs or mindless "surfing" on their phones, neglect-

1. *Review for Religious, Spiritual Life, Human Development*, and *The Way*.

ing the in-person community connections they need as images of God, who Christians believe is a Community of Persons.

We are called, I believe, to model a different answer, for our Church, for religion in general, and for our entire culture. Religious life, in all its manifold and beautiful charisms, has so much to offer to our contemporary world. We need to offer them. I would be honored beyond words if any of my writing contributed even a miniscule part in helping religious communities realize their call.

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