

“Juliet Mousseau’s *Prophetic Witnesses to Joy* provides a fresh look at religious life and the three vows that frame the life. Her thoughtful and scholarly treatment is accessible and readable. From a grounding in our Catholic tradition, Mousseau looks forward to re-imagine the vows for twenty-first-century religious. For those new to vowed life, it shows where we come from. For those with a lifetime of experience, it shows where we’re going.”

—Amy Hereford, CSJ, Attorney/Canonist

“Juliet Mousseau’s *Prophetic Witnesses to Joy* is clearly the most up-to-date theology of religious life available. It is an integrated, positive, theological, and experientially grounded exploration of consecrated life within the context of the universal call to holiness. A valuable read for anyone who desires to be a faithful disciple of Christ and a must read for those involved in the ministry of religious formation. A wise, refreshing, deeply human witness to a joyful way of life from the new generation of those who have found meaning in the life of vowed religious but also valuable for anyone who desires to reflect once again on a decision they may have made long ago.”

—Donald Goergen, OP

“Grounded both in both historical tradition and contemporary reality, Juliet Mousseau provides a much-needed, updated theology of the vows for the twenty-first century. Mousseau invites the reader to understand the vows as a way to follow Jesus, make meaning of our rapidly changing world, and live joyfully for the sake of the Gospel. Her book should be required reading for elected leaders, formators, those in formation, and all who believe in the present and future of religious life.”

—Susan Francois, CSJP, Assistant Congregation Leader,  
Sisters of St. Joseph of Peace



# Prophetic Witnesses to Joy

*A Theology of the Vowed Life*

Juliet Mousseau, RSCJ



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*I dedicate this book to the sisters who have gone before me  
in gratitude for their witness  
for their joy  
and for their fidelity to Love*



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# Preface

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This book arose from a need I discovered while teaching a course at Aquinas Institute of Theology on the Vowed Life as well as my own personal drive to understand the life I chose as a Religious of the Sacred Heart. My formation in the congregation emphasized my need to place vowed religious life within the theological reality of the Christian faith. This book feels like a simple beginning to a process that takes more than a lifetime. I hope someone finds it helpful and that all who pick it up find in it the joy of witnessing the love of God.

Special gratitude goes to the religious women and men who have guided me throughout the years, especially my mentors and formators. From you I learned what real joy is, the joy of being known and loved by God. A profound thank you.

# Introduction

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At the core of our Catholic faith is the belief that God created everything that is, including humanity as a whole and each individual person in all his or her uniqueness. God is good, God's creation is good, and God put us here on earth to be as happy and fulfilled as possible in this life and completely in the next. To that end, God sent Jesus, the only Son of God, to save us from all the ways we turn away from God and to show us the way to God's kingdom. Since the death and resurrection of Jesus, Christians around the world have been seeking to follow Jesus faithfully, to find joy, and to make the world a better place. For some Christians, that effort leads to religious life, in which each one offers all that he or she is and has in order to dedicate everything to God and to seek out God's kingdom. This call to religious life is often felt as an irresistible pull, something that draws the person inexplicably to a lifestyle that is impossible to explain to others. It's obvious to many religious that God *wants* them and that though free to turn away, consecrated life is the path to fulfillment.

I truly believe that God wants us to live wholly fulfilled lives and that in our fulfillment we will find joy. What brings us fulfillment? Nothing other than following where God leads us. The prophet Jeremiah teaches that God has a vision of each one of us before we are born: "Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you; before you were born I dedicated you, a prophet to the nations I appointed you" (Jer 1:5). God knows what we will do, how we will live, and what will make us happy. It is in prayerful discernment and choosing

to follow that vision that we begin to live out the joy God imagined for us. The irresistible pull that I felt to religious life must have something to do with that dream God had for me. How on earth is that possible? What might that mean? How do I work that out for myself and for my life as a religious?

As a professor in a theological school, with students who are in religious life and others who are deeply invested in and working toward the kingdom of God outside of religious life, I strive to connect faith and life for myself and my students. Religious life is a bright light for our church and for our world, and yet many people have no knowledge or experience of this light. So, we keep trying to put it on the light stand once again, for all to see.

The historical and theological traditions of the Catholic faith provide support for religious life, beginning with examples from the first years of the church following the life and death of Jesus—and even before and during the life of Jesus, our Jewish ancestors had similar patterns of a life devoted to God. Other traditions in the world also include small groups of people who seek out more deliberate ways of living their faith. There is no way that this book can explore all these areas, and no reason to in light of all the resources available to us today. Additionally, many works exist to guide us in spiritual reflection on these topics—and so this is not a need that this book seeks to fill.<sup>1</sup> Instead, based on my background as a historical theologian, I will seek to draw in the traditions (history) of the church as I explore the theological

1. See bibliography for references on religious life. The most comprehensive is Sandra Schneiders's three-volume opus, *Finding the Treasure: Locating Catholic Religious Life in a New Ecclesial and Cultural Context* (New York: Paulist, 2000), *Selling All: Commitment, Consecrated Celibacy, and Community in Catholic Religious Life* (New York: Paulist, 2001), and *Buying the Field: Religious Life in Mission to the World* (New York: Paulist, 2013). Many of the resources listed in the bibliography also include reflection questions.

underpinnings of religious life today. The world around us changes constantly, and those changes must be considered in our exploration of theology. So, the question I seek to explore here is, How do we live out our call to religious life in today's world, as reflected in today's theological language?

In considering this topic, questions emerged. Exploring the call of religious life, particularly in the writings of Pope Francis, led me to language about following God in joy and hope.<sup>2</sup> Yet, it is clear in the tradition that these are not characteristics unique to consecrated persons. All Christians are called to follow Jesus, and all are called to see the joy and hope our faith brings and to share it with others. So, what is unique in this regard about religious life? Another theme that emerged with Francis and other theologians is the idea that religious are to be prophetic witnesses in our world. Much has been written about religious as prophetic witnesses to the gospel message, which brings hope and joy to the world.<sup>3</sup> Again, all Christians are called to witness to the Gospel, so where does the unique vocation of consecrated religious lie?

The answer seems to revolve around all these ideas. Consecrated religious hold nothing in reserve in order to live as prophetic witnesses of the joy and hope of the Christian message. Free from other commitments that take time and energy away from this role, they offer a radical commitment

2. See, for instance, Antonio Spadaro, "‘Wake Up the World!’ Conversation with Pope Francis about the Religious Life," trans. Donald Maldari, *La Civiltà Cattolica* I.3–17 (2014).

3. See, for example, Michael Crosby, *Can Religious Life Be Prophetic?* (New York: Crossroad, 2004); Albert Nolan, "Religious Life as a Prophetic Witness," *Grace & Truth* 31, no. 2 (August 2014), 6–16; Mary Pellegrino, "Life on the Margins: Charismatic Principles for Modern Religious," *America Magazine*, October 16, 2013; and Donald Senior, "Living in the Meantime: Biblical Foundations for Religious Life," in *Living in the Meantime: Concerning the Transformation of Religious Life*, ed. Paul J. Philibert (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1994), 55–71.

to God. Consecrated religious, then, are called to be prophetic witnesses, bringing the joy and hope of the gospel with them in the world, wherever they go and in whatever they do. The radical nature of their witness, its single-mindedness, points to the possibility of a new world, one that more closely resembles the world God imagined at the moment of creation. The unique nature of this call is the depth to which it is lived out in vowed life.

The new world that Christians hope for, God's dream for creation, is both here and now and in the future beyond time—in the here and now, it is a world in which human dignity is never violated, and in a future time and place it is a world in which human beings are united to their Creator. A life of consecration prefigures God's world, God's desire for creation, by calling into question the this-worldly values of power, sexuality, and material possessions. Consecration to the evangelical counsels challenges the importance of these things to human dignity. It shows that we can be more fulfilled, happier, more whole without attachment to them. And it shows that detaching ourselves from these desires allows others to live with more dignity and greater ease as well. Consecrated life, then, is a prophetic witness to the joy of the eschatological call of Christianity. In the words of Pope Francis to religious men and women leading up to the Year of Consecrated Life, "Wake up the world! Be witnesses of a different way of doing things, of acting, of living! It is possible to live differently in this world. We are speaking of an eschatological outlook, of the values of the Kingdom incarnated here, on this earth. It is a question of leaving everything to follow the Lord."<sup>4</sup>

By starting with the theological foundations for a life consecrated to the evangelical counsels, we can examine the prophetic nature of each vow, along with its model of the kingdom of God on earth and the reign of God in heaven. In each of these areas, imagining the possibilities of a better

4. Spadaro, "Wake Up the World."

world here and now and in the age to come bring hope for the future and radiant joy. Thus, religious men and women are called to be prophetic witnesses to the joy God wants all of us to share.

It might be that the theological understandings professed here seem to be the same as what others have been writing about for centuries, and of course that is true. Our faith is an enduring reality; it is not something that changes. Yet, the Christian faith has only endured for two thousand years because the expression of the faith has been adapted to suit the world's changing needs. I hope the expression of the faith presented here is particularly suited to the world as it is today, increasingly non-Christian or anti-Christian, politically and religiously polarized, with greater connection among nations and at the same time increasing fear of those who are different. While the creed we profess forms a stable foundation of belief, the world changes at a remarkably increasing speed. Our faith must be able to speak to those changes, or it will lose its timelessness.

In this rapidly changing context, religious life, too, finds itself shifting. While there has always been an ebb and flow of membership in religious congregations and movements, the remarkable decrease in numbers over the course of a single lifetime since the Second Vatican Council seems shocking to those who lived through it.<sup>5</sup> A closer glance at history can help put this change in perspective, yet understanding it does not diminish the need to respond.<sup>6</sup> Women and men still long for spiritual meaning and purpose, and many still seek out the

5. These numbers are so frequently requested that the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) has a chart at the top of its webpage. See <https://cara.georgetown.edu/caraservices/rellife.html>. For more demographical information on the changes in religious life, see Mary Johnson, Patricia Wittberg, and Mary L. Gautier, *New Generations of Catholic Sisters: The Challenge of Diversity* (New York: Oxford University, 2014).

6. Diarmuid O'Murchu, *Religious Life in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: The Prospect of Refounding* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2016). Pages 64–67 discuss

vowed life as an expression of their life's longing.<sup>7</sup> Religious life and expressions of religious charisms find themselves in need of constantly renewed engagement with the world as it is today. Our life and charism are enduring, but they will become irrelevant if we isolate our language from the changes going on around us. In any relationship, when one side finds itself in new circumstances, the other side must adapt to the relationship or lose the connection altogether. Religious life that is not woven into the fabric of the world has lost its mission, given to us by Jesus Christ himself. New movements in theological language must be applied to the theology of religious life today in order to actively engage in the needs of the world.

This tension between the rootedness of the Christian tradition and the whirlwind of passing time forms the context of the prophetic witness religious life offers. Prophecy marks the grief and hope of our present moment in light of the identity we know from our past and the vision of newness for the future.<sup>8</sup> As Walter Brueggemann so clearly articulates, the prophetic witness of Christians offers critique of the contemporary status quo while imagining the newness of a hopeful future. Oppression and injustice, and all other forms of death, must be recognized and mourned. Then, the desire for newness, for change and a better life for everyone, awakens. The longing for change opens the way to the prophetic imagination of a future that more closely resembles the ideal world God saw at its creation.

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one approach to a cyclical history of religious life, one that bears out this change in demographics across 2,000 years.

7. CARA's regular studies of religious men and women are helpful guides to trends among those entering religious life. See <https://cara.georgetown.edu/caraservices/rellife.html>.

8. These two elements of prophetic witness come from Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001).

While all Christians are called to be prophetic witnesses, the religious man's or woman's interior and exterior freedom and deliberate focus on relationship with God place emphasis on this call in a special way. As the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life (CICLSAL) states, "The time of grace that we are living through, with Pope Francis's insistence on placing the Gospel and what is essentially Christian at the centre of things, is for consecrated men and women a new call to watchfulness, to be ready for the signs of God."<sup>9</sup> The freedom of detachment as articulated in the evangelical counsels allows our eyes to be completely open for the signs God reveals to us. Religious occupy a unique space in the church—neither clerical nor lay,<sup>10</sup> on the inside but also on the margins; in the world, and yet critical of it by vow. Religious women and men witness to the joy of a prophetic vision for the world, a joy which comes from deep faith and trust that the powers of the world do not and will never overcome the power of the Creator God. This joy is not unfounded—and the strength of this joy comes from knowing and deeply experiencing the grief of death in all its forms that plagues the world. Mourning opens the way for new life that can be imagined once the old ways are judged insufficient. Mourning makes way for imagination, enthusiasm, hope and joy, to let go of the ways of oppression and open the door to God's Beloved Community.<sup>11</sup> As consecrated religious, "We have to fight against eyes weighed down with sleep, so as not

9. CICLSAL, "Keep Watch! To Consecrated Men and Women Journeying in the Footsteps of God" (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2014), 7.

10. Though, technically speaking, religious life is integrated into both clerical and lay lifestyles, in practice and common sentiment it lies between the two realities.

11. Historical roots of the phrase "Beloved Community," popularized by Martin Luther King Jr., can be found here: <https://thekingcenter.org/about-tkc/the-king-philosophy/>.

to lose the attitude of discerning the movements of the cloud that guides our journey and to recognize in the small and frail signs the presence of the Lord of life and hope.”<sup>12</sup>

This book will present a theological basis for the prophetic nature of consecrated life. Chapter 1 focuses on theological anthropology, the *imago Dei* instilled in each human person that offers meaning and dignity. Our *imago Dei* means that we share in God’s essential characteristics, first among them being freedom. In freedom, we discern our path, surrounded by others who form a community modeled on the Trinity of persons that is God. It is from this human foundation that women and men choose to consecrate their lives in the evangelical counsels of obedience, poverty, and chastity.

The second chapter continues the foundational elements of religious life by examining the integrated whole of living by the three vows. While the three vows are treated separately in the following chapters, here they are examined as a coherent life form that evolves from the time of the prophets to the present day. Through commitment, the religious finds a depth of freedom that is not possible without commitment. This life commitment will be shown as a prophetic witness to the hope and joy offered by the Christian faith.

Chapters 3, 4, and 5 examine each of the evangelical counsels separately. Beginning with obedience, they are demonstrated to be a witness to the path lived by Jesus for the church today. Each one is a prophetic challenge to the status quo of the world as it is now, offering a countercultural witness to a world that is different and renewed. This prophetic witness in each vow points to a future world here on earth and existence beyond the grave in the promise of resurrection to eternal life with God. Hope for a better world is the foundation of our joy as Christians and a witness to others that our faith is real and alive.

12. CICLSAL, “Keep Watch,” 7.

One final impetus for writing this book comes from my experience of religious life among religious of many different congregations. Since my very first days as a candidate in my community, I have participated in the national group Giving Voice, which draws together women religious under age fifty for conversation, companionship, and shared leadership.<sup>13</sup> In Giving Voice, I found my companions on this journey, women who entered religious congregations singly or in groups of two. Our shared experience of formation, community, and generation allowed us to grow in friendship. While my call drew me to the Society of the Sacred Heart, and I find myself at home in my congregation's charism, the call to religious life in general gave me a second home among women from many congregations in Giving Voice. My hope is that this book speaks in some way to all of us. As Pope Francis and others have articulated in the last few years, there is a common charism (or "global charism") of religious life shared by all women and men who have committed to it.<sup>14</sup> My experience in Giving Voice showed me that long before I heard anyone else speak of it. Knowing that all our differences represent unique facets of God's reign only gives brilliance and color to the kingdom of God. May we find in one another motivation to follow the individual calls God offers each one.

13. See [www.giving-voice.org](http://www.giving-voice.org).

14. Márian Ambrosio, "Weaving Solidarity for Life: Living and Witnessing as Women Religious of Apostolic Life" (keynote address presented at the International Union of Superiors General Plenary Assembly, Rome, May 9–13, 2016), [http://www.internationalunionsuperiorsgeneral.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/PI-2016\\_Marian-Ambrosio\\_ENG.pdf](http://www.internationalunionsuperiorsgeneral.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/PI-2016_Marian-Ambrosio_ENG.pdf); Mary Therese Perez, "Local and Global: Charism of Religious Life Today," in *In Our Own Words: Religious Life in a Changing World*, ed. Juliet Mousseau and Sarah Kohles (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2018), 67–81.



## CHAPTER ONE

# Foundations of a Call

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### *Introduction*

Jesus calls his followers to holiness, urging repentance and declaring that God’s kingdom is coming. At the same time, his actions show us what it means to strive for the kingdom in the present time. Thus, the message is about right now and at the same time about the future world. Ultimately, he is calling us to our fulfillment, to eternal happiness with God in heaven. As children who grew up in the first half of the twentieth century learned from the *Baltimore Catechism*, “God made me to know him, to love him, and to serve him in this world, and to be happy with him for ever in Heaven.”<sup>1</sup> Deciding how to work toward that fulfillment requires a call to conversion followed by a lifetime of discernment. The initial discernment results in a life direction that varies widely from person to person. One focus of the Second Vatican Council was to eliminate the hierarchy of holiness among human persons. The document *Lumen Gentium* (LG; Dogmatic Constitution on the Church) in chapter V, “The Call to Holiness,” asserted, “all in the Church, whether they belong to the hierarchy or are cared for by it, are called to holiness, according to the

1. *The Baltimore Catechism*, lesson 1, q 6.

apostle's saying: 'For this is the will of God, your sanctification.'<sup>2</sup> Thus, every Christian person is called to follow Jesus. Whereas the *Baltimore Catechism* taught that holiness was best lived as a priest, second best as a sister or nun, and only third best as a married man or woman, the Second Vatican Council declined to place one way of life over another. "It is therefore quite clear that all Christians in any state or walk of life are called to the fullness of Christian life and to the perfection of love, and by this holiness a more human manner of life is fostered also in earthly society" (LG 40). Since the council, which marked such a dramatic shift in thought, theologians have further expressed the value of single life as a way toward holiness. Married life, parenthood, single life, consecrated celibacy, ordained priesthood—all are paths that lead the committed Christian toward joy and God.

Holiness, then, has been democratized. "The forms and tasks of life are many, but holiness is one—that sanctity which is cultivated by all who act under God's Spirit and, obeying the Father's voice and adoring God the Father in spirit and in truth, follow Christ, poor, humble, and cross-bearing, that they may deserve to be partakers in his glory. Each one, however, according to his own gifts and duties must steadfastly advance along the way of a living faith, which arouses hope and works through love" (LG 41). Each way of life allows for growth in holiness and greater union with God. That said, each one is different and by its nature involves distinct commitments that guide the path of holiness. Christians are all called by Jesus to act with faith and compassion, bringing his message to others. With these universal calls of Christians in mind, how do those who have consecrated their lives to God live differently? How does this particular path to God

2. *Lumen Gentium* 39. Quotations of Vatican II documents are taken from Austin Flannery, ed., *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Postconciliar Documents* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2014).

bear witness to Jesus in a unique way? How does it offer happiness to those who live it?

Church documents have attempted to answer these questions by presenting the prophetic nature of consecrated life, in which the living out the evangelical counsels becomes a sign of the holiness to which all Christians are called:

The growing awareness of the universality of the call to holiness on the part of all Christians, far from making the belonging to a state of life particularly adapted to the realization of evangelical perfection superfluous can become an added motive for joy for consecrated persons. They are now closer to the other members of the People of God with whom they share a common path in the following of Christ, in a more authentic communion, in mutual respect, without being superior or inferior. At the same time this awareness challenges them to understand the sign value of consecrated life in relation to the holiness of all the members of the Church.<sup>3</sup>

As a sign of the holiness of the church, consecrated religious can find joy in pointing the direction to the way of Jesus in ordinary life.

This initial chapter on theological anthropology places religious life in the context of what it means to be human—the reality shared by everyone on earth, as understood in the Christian context. Theological anthropology gives meaning to basic assumptions about our lives: why we were created, where sin and evil come from, how we are in relationship with God, what it means to be a human community, and how we find fulfillment in this life and the next.

3. CICLSAL, “Starting Afresh from Christ: A Renewed Commitment to Consecrated Life in the Third Millennium,” (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2002), 13, [https://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/ccsrlife/documents/rc\\_con\\_ccsrlife\\_doc\\_20020614\\_ripartire-da-cristo\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccsrlife/documents/rc_con_ccsrlife_doc_20020614_ripartire-da-cristo_en.html).

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