"This book was born of an expressed need of newer religious for more contemporary work on religious life and the vows. It led them to ask the questions: 'If not us, who? If not now, when?' The voices of its thirteen authors pulse with new energy that both inspires and challenges readers. In their sharing of personal stories and scholarly insights, they offer new interpretations to this constantly evolving lifeform in our Church and world today."

— Ellen Dauwer, SC
Executive Director of the Religious Formation Conference

"What has been timeless and essential to religious life, passed on for generations, finds both honor and new expression as these newer members of religious life articulate their experience. This is an important read for all who are interested in the evolution of religious life and its continuing vitality into the future."

— Nancy Schreck, OSF
Sisters of St. Francis
Dubuque, Iowa

In Our Own WORDS

Religious Life in a Changing World

Edited by
Juliet Mousseau, RSCJ,
and
Sarah Kohles, OSF

LITURGICAL PRESS
Collegeville, Minnesota
www.litpress.org

Cover design by Monica Bokinskie. Photo by Annmarie Sanders, IHM. From left to right, standing: Mary Teresa Perez, OP; Deborah Warner, CND; Christa Parra, IBVM; Susan Rose Francois, CSJP; Juliet Mousseau, RSCJ; Virginia Herbers, ASCJ; Thuy Tran, CSJ; and Madeleine Miller, OSB. Seated: Desiré Findlay, CSSF; Sarah Kohles, OSF; Tracy Kemme, SC; Amanda Carrier, RSM; and Teresa Maya, CCVI.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Mousseau, Juliet, editor.
Title: In our own words : religious life in a changing world. / edited by Juliet Mousseau, RSCJ, and Sarah Kohles, OSF.
Description: Collegeville, Minnesota : Liturgical Press, 2018. | Includes bibliographical references.
Identifiers: LCCN 2017030088 (print) | LCCN 2017047803 (ebook) | ISBN 9780814645208 | ISBN 9780814645444 (ebook)
Subjects: LCSH: Monastic and religious life of women. | Nuns. | Catholic Church.
Classification: LCC BX4210 .I54 2018 (print) | LCC BX4210 (ebook) | DDC 206/.57—dc23
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2017030088

Contents

Acknowledgments

As is the case with any collaborative undertaking, there are many people who contributed to the success of this project for whom we are grateful. We are particularly thankful for Giving Voice and all its leaders who dreamt of, created, and maintained the space for younger women religious to experience peers and share their experiences of religious life with one another. This book grew out of connections and conversations that could only happen in a peer space of younger women religious.

Thank you to the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation, who gifted us with a grant that supported our collaborative process for writing this book. Because of the Hilton Foundation, we were able to meet in person for our writing retreat without worrying about how we would afford travel, housing, food, etc. This grant allowed us to be free to focus on the project itself rather than the incidental costs that might otherwise have been prohibitive to constructing such a collaborative effort.

Thank you also to the Sisters of St. Francis of Dubuque, who agreed to receive the grant money for this project on behalf of Juliet Mousseau, RSCJ, and Sarah Kohles, OSF.

Many thanks are also due to Annmarie Sanders, IHM, who joined us for the retreat week. Annmarie assisted us by framing the day with prayer and lending her writing expertise in one-on-one meetings with the writers. Thank you to the Leadership Conference of Women Religious for sharing Annmarie with

us that week. It would not have been possible to find someone better suited for this task.

Thank you to Tracy Kemme, SC, and Tracey Horan, SP—affectionately called "Team Trac(e)y"—for their willingness to join Juliet and Sarah in person for a few intense editing days. Your assistance in polishing these chapters was tremendous, and we are truly grateful.

Finally, thank you to the many sisters who live religious life faithfully and serve as models to us and to the world. We hold you and your example in our hearts, and we know you hold us as well. Thank you to all those who have written about religious life up to this point. Your wisdom has shaped our thinking and touched us deeply. Thank you to all the sisters who have expressed delight and interest in our project and offered prayer and support. Every step of this book process was filled with grace and blessing—no doubt because of your care. Thank you to the many women who are continuing to say "yes" to religious life. We are grateful for your courage and your "yes," and we look forward to hearing your voices.

Introduction

This book is the fulfillment of a dream Juliet had three years ago. As she prepared for final profession, she was exploring her understanding of the vows even as she lived them. The books and articles she found available were usually published at least fifteen years before and were often written by women and men who had been in religious life for many years. Juliet gained a lot of wisdom from reading those works, but sometimes the realities they spoke of did not seem to fit the world she was entering so many years later. The demographics of the Church and of religious life changed rather dramatically between the 1990s and 2012.[1] Additionally, nearly all of those writings defined religious life by what it was not; those authors who lived through the changes of the Second Vatican Council invariably spoke of how religious life had changed. Juliet found herself longing to hear someone talk about religious life as it is lived today rather than in contrast to what it was over fifty years ago.

Sarah recalls a couple of conversations at the Giving Voice 20s and 30s retreat in which two women in formation asked

[1] Several sources speak to the shifting demographics of Catholic sisters today. The most comprehensive of these is Mary Johnson, Patricia Wittberg, and Mary L. Gautier, *New Generations of Catholic Sisters: The Challenge of Diversity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014). Another source for continuing research is the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA), http://cara.georgetown.edu/.

the group what we were reading about the vows. They, like Juliet, were looking for something more current that would help them wrestle with how to live the vows they were preparing to profess in today's world. We went around the circle and discovered there actually was not much else to read besides what they had already discovered. After a similar conversation occurred again at the 20s and 30s retreat the following year, we realized that these materials did not exist yet because we have not written them. Juliet then called Sarah after Christmas in 2016 saying she was convinced now was the time to respond to the call we were hearing to write and to encourage others to join us.

When we first began planning this book, it was once again among a group of young religious who were under age forty. We were sitting around discussing the great scholars and writers who had shaped us or were shaping us in our formation. As we talked, we thought about how those greats were aging and that it seemed no one was taking their place. Sarah and Juliet remember realizing and looking at each other in that moment before saying aloud to the group that no one person could take their places, we need to hear all our voices, in their diversity, united around the topics that are most significant to us and central to our lives. And so our journey toward writing this book began.

From the beginning of Juliet's initiation of the project, our priorities were diversity and collaboration. These were our touchstones as we discerned who to invite to participate and how we would structure the process. We did not want a number of sisters to merely write and submit their chapters. We wanted to create a group that would engage in a collaborative process to shape this project. Therefore, participating sisters were asked to commit to monthly calls that helped us discern our chapters together and were followed by a weeklong writing retreat.

We discussed who should be invited to this project with a view not to who were the best writers, but to whose voices we wanted to put together. While the voices of male religious are

important as well, we decided to limit our contributors to women. We wanted a cross section of the current Catholic Church and the women who are answering the call to religious life. That meant ethnic diversity, age diversity (though under 50), and diverse charisms and visions of religious life. We wanted to represent membership in LCWR as well as membership in CMSWR. We wanted sisters who considered themselves primarily apostolic, sisters who prefer to call themselves "evangelical," and missionary sisters. We deliberately limited our group to members of congregations that are not contemplative. We wanted members of communities who traditionally serve people who are poor, who are known for their hospitals, and who teach children and adults. We wanted orders who wore habits and those who did not. We wanted sisters who were in ministries of leadership, formation, and vocations, as well as sisters who had made temporary vows but were still in initial formation. While there are so many more who could have been included, we are happy with the variety of perspectives represented by the thirteen women featured in this book. However, we recognize that our voices are but a snapshot of religious life today in North America.

Just as our choice of participants was important, so also was our collaborative way of working together. We began by communicating over social media, using a private Facebook page. In August 2016 we started more intentional communications that led to four monthly video conferences. At each monthly conference, we checked in with one another and began formally discussing our desires for the project and what we thought it needed. In our first meeting, we asked ourselves, "What do you want to see included in this book, even if you are not the person to write it?" We then followed up with sharing what each one felt called to write. As we moved through the months and continued to pray together and individually, these topics shifted slightly, though they largely remained very similar to those initial inclinations.

For three of our video conferences, we read or watched talks given by significant figures in the study of religious life and

used their words as a basis for in-depth conversation. For example, we read the talk by Márian Ambrosio, IDP, to the gathering of the International Union of Superiors General in Rome from May 2016 and found ourselves discussing the significance of who we are as women religious, articulated by how we do what we do, rather than the ministries in which we are involved.[2] We watched "Religious Life: Called to Undertake a Journey of Transformation," a talk given by Sr. Patricia Murray, IBVM, at an event sponsored by Catholic Theological Union's Center for the Study of Consecrated Life,[3] in which she challenged listeners to embrace a prophetic transformation in our lives that leads us into the unknown. Finally, we had a video conference call with Ted Dunn to discuss the results of his survey of younger women religious.

In all these conversations, we developed our friendship and trust among a group of women who did not all know one another. Even Juliet and Sarah did not personally know everyone who was invited to participate in the project. Prior to this project one sister was only known to the group via her participation in the closed Giving Voice Facebook group. When we met in person for a weeklong writing retreat in Houston in January 2017, we began a more intense time of work, prayer, play, and intimate conversations about what is most central to our lives. Because of the amount of work we had already done together through conference calls, sharing documents, and Facebook messages, we could begin from a place of familiarity, which allowed us to move more quickly into the deeper shar-

[2] Márian Ambrosio, "Weaving Solidarity for Life—Living and Witnessing as Women Religious of Apostolic Life," International Union of Superiors General Plenary 2016, May 2016, Rome, Italy, accessed May 8, 2017, http://www.internationalunionsuperiorsgeneral.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Pl-2016_Marian-Ambrosio_ENG.pdf.

[3] Patricia Murray, "Religious Life: Called to Undertake a Journey of Transformation," Keynote address, Global Call of Religious Life Conference. Catholic Theological Union, Chicago, Illinois, November 3, 2015, accessed May 8, 2017, http://learn.ctu.edu/category/tags/patricia-murray.

ing that is characteristic of longer-established relationships. During the writing retreat, we formed a routine: morning check-in and prayer together, the bulk of the day for writing and quiet work by ourselves, followed by a return to small groups in order to spend time reading each other's writings and asking questions. In the evenings, we played cards, drank wine, colored, and laughed until our sides ached. The flexibility of the schedule allowed early mornings and late nights for those who needed other times to work.

One of the great delights of the week was to watch women who were anxious about putting their thoughts on paper courageously embrace the identity of fledgling writers. We witnessed the energy shift from initial anxiety to genuine enthusiasm to read and talk about what others were writing. Our afternoon critique sessions began with five minutes of silent prayer together and concluded with an opportunity to name insights or articulate what was emerging. We held each writer and her work gently. These were the most sacred of our times together. We found in one another's words our own voice spoken aloud across our differences. As one of us said on the closing day, "Your voice is my voice, is our voice." Our hearts are united with this precious common gift of religious life.

After our week together, most people had solid rough drafts of their chapters. Each sister continued to write and polish her chapter over the next couple of months, and the editing team of four sisters met for three days in Berkeley, California, for collaborative editing. This, too, was a sacred process, as we read and discussed each essay together.

In This Book—In Our Own Words

This book is made up of thirteen different voices of sisters spanning three decades from those in their late 20s to late 40s (at the time they were invited to write). Every sister in this book has at least professed her first vows, though approximately half of the group is still in initial formation. One sister

has celebrated her 25th Jubilee. Six of the thirteen sisters (or 46 percent) are women of color. The writers represent thirteen communities and twelve charisms. While we made an effort to reach out to CMSWR communities, there are far more sisters from LCWR communities represented in this book. Three of the writers have served formally in congregational leadership, vocation, or formation ministries. Only about half of the sisters considered themselves writers, and a number of them needed encouragement to be persuaded into saying "yes" to this project. As a result of the diversity of writers, readers will find a wide range of writing styles in this book. Most of the writers engage theology, Scripture, spirituality, theory and/or current data on religious life as they relate their own insights in living religious life today.

The original impetus for this book was the lack of current materials on living religious life today in general, and the vows in particular. Therefore, the primary intended audience is those who are new to religious life and in formation. However, we believe that the wider audience of religious life will find much here to appreciate and discuss as well. Every chapter demonstrates the author's reflection on religious life "in (her) own words." This freed us up from the pressure of needing to say something brand new about religious life on every page. However, this book is valuable in providing examples of experiences of younger women religious today who are living in a world that is in constant flux. It also demonstrates how younger sisters understand and name their experiences through various theological frameworks. Even though living the vows was the original conceptual focus, this book covers a range of topics relevant to religious life today. The topics the writers explored cluster around three general areas: vows, identity, and leadership into the future.

The first four chapters of this volume focus on the biblical, theological, and experiential elements of living community and the evangelical counsels. Chapter 1 by Virginia Herbers, ASCJ, calls us to embrace community in the light of the com-

munion to which Jesus invites us in the Eucharist. The second chapter, by Sarah Kohles, OSF, addresses what it means to take a vow from the perspective of the Old Testament story of Hannah. Third, Juliet Mousseau, RSCJ, explores the meaning of the vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience in the light of God's creation and vision of the human person. Fourth, Tracy Kemme, SC, claims the power of the vows as radical expressions of the love of Jesus in today's world.

The next chapters loosely encircle questions of identity as individuals and religious. Mary Perez, OP, articulates the relationship between the charisms of individual congregations and the global charism of religious life, opening the door for deep growth into identity. Desiré Findlay, CSSF, then speaks to her experience of growth in personal identity and sense of vocation through her congregation, using the images of the growth of a flower. Thuy Tran, CSJ, explores her identity as a Vietnamese-American woman, Catholic, and Sister of St. Joseph, through the lens of the paschal mystery.

Thuy's chapter segues into a third theme, that of interaction among diverse identities and groups of people. Madeleine Miller, OSB, speaks of the blessings, gifts, and challenges of living in communities that cross boundaries of ethnicity and age groups. Christa Parra, IBVM, uses her story as a Latina sister in a predominantly Irish community to illustrate her identity as a border crosser. Amanda Carrier, RSM, speaks to the unique ways women religious answer the world's need for compassion today.

A final area of interest among the authors is that of leadership that looks toward the future, beginning with suggestions for preparing younger members for leadership by Teresa Maya, CCVI. Next, Susan Francois, CSJP, speaks of her experience as a younger leader at a time when the direction religious life is taking is "foggy." The book concludes with Deborah Warner, CND, whose reflections echo many of the themes of previous essays, envisioning the future of religious life.

Though these four themes seemed to dominate the chapters, we also discovered a number of threads woven into multiple

chapters. The world is constantly changing and so how we live as women religious is changing, too. These chapters reflect an honest struggle to name our experiences—the beautiful, the challenging, and the sometimes difficult aspects of religious life. Throughout these chapters, love for our sisters shines through consistently and strongly. An underlying hint of grief for frequent losses accompanies this love—sometimes it remains under the surface and sometimes it receives greater attention. The exploration of religious life as a countercultural experience shows up through a number of essays, though the concept of what is countercultural takes different forms in the hands of different writers. Finally, while certain chapters focus particularly on the vows and their theological and biblical underpinnings, numerous chapters explore the connection of the vows to other aspects of religious life.

Within the background of the larger conversation on religious life, it is meaningful to reflect on what is not contained in this book. As this book grew out of the questions of young women religious within the space created by Giving Voice, it was a natural choice to focus on the perspectives of women religious within this book. While the insights of our brothers in religious life are missing from these pages, we look forward to joining with them as conversation partners.

Our common discernment process allowed any significant area of conversation to emerge, and so no topics were deliberately avoided. It is interesting to note that none of the thirteen authors engage new cosmology. A few chapters lightly touch on environmental concerns, but they are not the primary focus of any of the chapters. Also, while a number of chapters acknowledge a relationship with the Catholic Church, none of the chapters explicitly explores the relationship between religious life and the Church or the hierarchy. Passing over these topics does not indicate that they are unimportant, unworthy of inclusion, or that younger sisters are not interested in them. However, we acknowledge that they were not the focus our sister-authors felt called to explore in this book.

This book is only the beginning of our larger project. Our collaboration together began with conversations: let us continue to talk about what it means to be religious women and how we must engage with our changing world. We need to embrace the diversity of religious life today, to hear the voices of all our sisters and brothers who seek to follow Jesus in this life. All along the path, our efforts have been validated by the simplicity with which the project moved forward. We trust that the Spirit of Wisdom has been guiding this work, and we eagerly place it into the hands of our readers in order to continue the sharing.

Juliet and Sarah

Communities in Communion: Shifting into New Life

Virginia Herbers, ASCJ

"It's not about winning." That's what winners usually say to losers to make them feel better, right? I sat around a table last night with a group of religious sisters playing Uno, and we all agreed that it wasn't about winning; but I venture to say that we likewise knew at the end of the night who walked away as winners and who didn't. So, if it's not about winning, what is it about? What happened around that Uno table was both personal and prophetic. It really wasn't about winning. We played five rounds, and each round held commentary, intrigue, meaningful interaction, distraction, occasional virtue, and plentiful laughter. That's what it was really all about, and that is what we call life in community.

I have been asked by students, family, even strangers, "What's the most rewarding part of religious life?" More often than not, as I ponder the question, the answer comes back swiftly, "community living." Being surrounded by women who have given their entire lives as a gift to the service of God's people, returning home each evening to a praying community, waking up each new day to launch into a mission founded on a common charism: these are all gifts beyond measure; and the accumulation of those gifts over the years is nothing short of true grace.

Then, the next question from those same students, family, and strangers usually follows in short order: "What's the hardest part?" With a wry smile, my answer is always the same: "community living." Put two or more women in the same house, and prepare yourself for the ramifications. How sheets are folded, when dinner is served, who holds the remote, where the car gets parked: these all become negotiations. Even in a religious house, it's not always pretty. Negotiations sometimes devolve into winning and losing.

Paradigm Shift

For quite a few years now, multiple authors have been writing about the sense that religious life is in the midst of a paradigm shift.[1] What does that mean exactly? "Paradigm shift" describes a general change in the consciousness, vision, or communal perception of reality in the current moment, and it can apply to any given social reality. These shifts occur when the prevailing worldview (the way things are and "have always been") no longer works well or fits the needs of the moment. Barbara Fiand writes, "Ours is a time when cultural paradigms are collapsing and the dualistic worldview which served so well for centuries in bringing us not only progress and prosperity, but also the spirituality to support them, has reached the limits of its own possibilities and is beckoning us from within its own demise to move beyond it and look for deeper, more authentic ways of seeing."[2] Does this apply to

[1] Sources in support of the "paradigm shift" in religious life include: Anneliese Sinnot, "Shifting Paradigms: A New Reality," in *Journey in Faith and Fidelity: Women Shaping Religious Life for a Renewed Church*, ed. Nadine Foley (New York: Continuum, 1999), 95–123; Sean D. Sammon, *Religious Life in America* (New York: Alba House, 2002); Diarmuid O'Murchu, *Consecrated Religious Life: The Changing Paradigms* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2005); and Amy Hereford, *Religious Life at the Crossroads* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2013).

[2] Barbara Fiand, *Refocusing the Vision: Religious Life into the Future* (New York: Crossroads, 2001), 12–13.

religious life today? A resounding "Yes!" is how most women religious would respond. Even so, I venture to say that there exists a substantial variety of contexts out of which the response so eagerly comes.

More than three decades ago, and consistently ever since, men and women religious have been charged with becoming "experts in communion."[3] This implies study, practice, and a commitment to the continual perfecting of the art that is communion. So what exactly does communion mean in this context? Communion has eucharistic, spiritual, communitarian, ministerial, and even social elements. If we in religious life are called to become experts in communion, then we would do well at least to consider how communion happens, because it emerges neither automatically nor naturally. I propose that communion is the result of our values, our choices in living, and our interactions in community. In religious life, I believe communion is expressed through our vowed commitment to God manifested in discipleship, community, and service.

Communion Paradigm

Our world and our society are divided in many ways today. Externally this is evidenced in politics, economics, and social inequalities, to name a few. Internally, the divisions are equally clear, as seen in the rise of depression and psychological distress. Division is the antithesis of communion. Such division, however, is often how we categorize reality, believing it to be both necessary for good order and generally harmless: Are you a morning or a night person? Do you exercise? Are you on Twitter? Aisle or window? Mountains or ocean? Windows or Mac? With each categorization, we have drawn separations, boundaries, and definitions of who you are and who I am, how

[3] The phrase was first used by the Sacred Congregation for Religious and Secular Institutes, *Religious and Human Promotion* (Boston: Daughters of St. Paul, 1980), 24.

those are not the same, and, if we're honest, usually which choice is considered better. This is not always bad, but it could be more insidious than we might expect. When you and I are different, there is usually a divide between us. You like chocolate, and I like vanilla; so, we cannot share ice cream. You are Republican, and I am Democrat; so, we cannot speak about politics in polite company. You are shy, and I am outgoing; so, we find each other intimidating. Difference implies division.

Yet that is not Gospel truth. Gospel truth promises that difference implies diversity, and diversity calls us to unity. Diversity and unity are thus mutually constitutive, not mutually exclusive. Diversity without unity is division, and unity without diversity is uniformity. In a Gospel perspective, what distinguishes or diversifies us enriches the whole, and what unites or unifies us is the variety of our giftedness.[4]

In her book *The Holy Thursday Revolution*, Beatrice Bruteau writes about the "communion paradigm." She describes it as "a symmetrical, reciprocal relation of enhancement of being: that beings may be, may become all that they can be, may act in maximum freedom and be valued for their incomparable preciousness. Here I am I by virtue of being in-you/with-you/for-you, not outside and not against—not even separate. Consequently, helping one another is always helping oneself, for the 'selfhood' itself has expanded in a complex, systemic way."[5] Since the first time I read this, I have been captivated by the possibility that there is another way of being, a fresh way of thinking, a new way to live in this world that is so characterized by division and separation. That way is *communion*. Bruteau's sense that the current paradigm shift can be characterized as a shift to a communion paradigm is a bold and beautiful call. But is it trustworthy? Is it possible? Is it even appropriate?

[4] Cf. 1 Cor 12:12-31.

[5] Beatrice Bruteau, *The Holy Thursday Revolution* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2005), 70.

Trinitarian Communion

As Christians, we profess a trinitarian God: one God, three Persons. "The doctrine of the Trinity affirms that the essence of God is relational, other-ward, that God exists as diverse Persons united in a communion of freedom, love, and knowledge."[6] This God is distinction without division, unity in diversity, diversity comprising perfect unity. Jesus Christ, the Second Person of that trinitarian union, is the very incarnation of our God. As a consecrated religious woman, I profess my vows to this God, and I commit to the vocation of *sequela Christi* (following the example of Jesus, the incarnate Word of God) in every facet of my living. Jesus is God-with-us in human flesh and bone. His very person is quite literally the embodiment of what communion in God looks like. Because our vocation is *sequela Christi*, we are committed in baptism, vowed in community, and consecrated in the Spirit to follow where Christ leads, live according to his example, and give public witness to all God's people. Beyond being appropriate, possible, and trustworthy, these combined elements of religious vows make the communion paradigm essential to the consecrated life.

Consider the sacramental reception of communion. We receive Christ's body in the Eucharist, allowing it to form us as a whole, with all our diversities, into the one Body of Christ, the People of God. We, in the physical consumption of the Eucharist, quite literally become what we receive[7] and are so transformed that, as Teresa of Ávila understood, we become the hands and feet, the body and blood of Christ himself. This is more than pious posturing—it speaks a vital truth to our world today. In a society trapped in the "obsession with

[6] Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), 273.

[7] Cf. Augustine of Hippo, Sermon 272, quoted in John E. Rotelle, ed., WSA, Sermons, Part 3, Vol. 7, trans. Edmund Hill (Hyde Park: New City, 1993), 300–1.

consumption,"[8] where advertising and media encourage an insatiable appetite to have more, to be more, to do more, we recognize the inexhaustible appetite we have for God. This craving for more, both in the hunger for the daily bread (Matt 6:11) that sustains us, and also in the hunger and thirst for righteousness (Matt 5:6), finds its satisfaction only in the commitment to make God's kingdom come, here and now. Inscribed on the altar in the provincialate chapel of my community is the Latin saying attributed to St. Bernard, "Jesu, qui te gustant esuriunt." (Jesus, whoever tastes of you hungers all the more.) This reminds us, over and against our culture of conspicuous consumption, that the more we come to know and receive Christ—in Eucharist and in encountering him in the members of his Body that we meet each day—the more we recognize that God is the source and object of our inexhaustible hunger. Rather than leading us into greater selfishness and greed, this hunger thrusts us outward on mission as a community of believers. We profess this in our beliefs, but in living it, we incarnate those beliefs, true to the vocation of *sequela Christi*, shifting gently but wholly into a new way of living and being: the communion paradigm.

Why Communion?

Of all the various paradigms that religious life could be shifting into at this moment in history, why the insistence that it must be to the communion paradigm? Because the alternative to communion is division, and what the future of women's religious life can absolutely not afford any longer is division: division of the old sisters from the young sisters, the conservative orders from the liberal orders, the new cosmology from

[8] Francis, *Laudato Sí* (Encyclical On Care for Our Common Home), Vatican Website, May 24, 2015, sec. 222, accessed February 16, 2017, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html.

eucharistic adoration, LCWR from CMSWR, the faithful from the unfaithful, the relevant from the out-of-touch, the vibrant from the dying. Enough already—*enough*. If we in religious life are not one, then you are you and I am I, and "ne'er the 'twain shall meet." Do not misunderstand: I am not naïvely envisioning one single reality where all differences are subsumed into perfect unanimity. This is not about gathering around a campfire, holding hands, and singing "kumbaya" as we rejoice that our differences are irrelevant. Differences matter. Differences matter a lot, but they do not need to be divisive. They need to be recognized, acknowledged, wrestled with, validated, and integrated into the whole. And ideally, they need to be celebrated. Diversity yes, division no.

The communion paradigm does not have homogeneity as its goal; the hope of the communion paradigm is unity with vibrant, stunning diversity. It is about living together in harmony, knowing that some are singing alto and some are playing trombone, but we're all about the same song. It is about living in intercultural, intergenerational, and intercongregational communities, maintaining the integrity of our own identity while simultaneously needing others to maintain the integrity of theirs. It is about eliminating "us versus them" language—in our communities, in our conferences, and in our own belief systems. It is about moving away from comments like, "When we were your age, we used to . . ." "They can't understand our generation," "We support ecclesial authority," "They aren't serving the poor," "Why don't they let us lead?" and "We suffered so much to finally get rid of what they are now asking for!" The dichotomies of duality and division created by such language, and the belief system out of which that language comes, are in complete contradiction to the communion Jesus came to establish among his followers as an example of how to be fully human, how to live our lives as incarnations of the very love of God. The communion paradigm utterly obliterates such false dichotomies. It is not "us" and "them"—it never has been. Jesus did not establish his

identity and values over and against anyone else—Father, Spirit, disciple, or sinner. The identity and values of God were literally embodied in his person, in his living and interacting, and he freely, indiscriminately, gave of himself to every single "other" he encountered. Moreover, he didn't just give; he entered into mutual relationship. He desired to receive the "other" as well. When the Pharisees labeled a sinner, Jesus invited himself to that sinner's house for supper (Luke 7:36). When the apostles called out "traitor!" Jesus bent to wash the feet of the one he called "friend" (John 13:5). When propriety and religious protocol stood in the way of relationship, Jesus unhesitatingly blurred the boundary and asked for a drink of water (John 4:7). Lines of distinction did not become lines of division.

Until they did. "When the Son of Man will come in his glory . . . all the nations will be assembled before him. And he will separate them one from another, as a shepherd separates the sheep from goats" (Matt 25:32).[9] So, what happens here and in a variety of other places in the gospels? Why does Jesus support separation of the nations? Why is Jesus not only encouraging but exercising division? I am not a biblical theologian, so this is not a challenge to the greater scholarship that more deeply probes this particular passage and its theological meaning. But looking at Jesus' selective separation in this case, how might we understand it from the context of the communion paradigm? What actually created this division, this lack of communion? Was it Jesus himself or was it something else? Ironically, it seems that what created the division between the sheep and the goats was their choice to treat "the other" as Christ, or not. Those who could not see Christ in the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the stranger, the ill, or the imprisoned, those who could only see "the other": they are the goats who

[9] *The New American Bible Revised Edition (NABRE)* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010). Quotations from the Bible will be from the *NABRE* unless otherwise noted.

are separate and separated. Those who saw no distinction between Christ and "the other" were brought into perfect unity with each other and with Jesus. How ironic. Perhaps the separation of sheep and goats is not an external punitive decision of the divine judge; maybe it is the natural consequence of a chosen worldview.

Diversity is a given; unity is a choice. What Jesus began, we are called to continue. As difficult a mission as it might be, nothing is more vital to—and, arguably, nothing more absent from—our world today. From the first decades of the missionary church, this truth has been heralded: we are no longer Jews or Greeks, slaves or free persons, male or female, but we are one. *We are one.* Did St. Paul eliminate religious, social, and economic distinctions? It doesn't seem so. Jews remained Jews, slaves remained slaves, and males remained males. The distinctions were not eradicated; they were identified as essential parts to a greater whole. "For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body" (1 Cor 12:13). Without the uniqueness of each of the individual parts, the beauty and completeness of the whole is compromised. Likewise, without the cohesiveness of the whole, the individual parts lose vitality and become isolated.

The Communion Paradigm and Religious Life

So what might a commitment to the communion paradigm look like in women's religious life right now? We can only provide a sketch here. As noted above, the communion paradigm has its foundation in the reality of the Trinity, but its praxis is best apprehended through the lens of the Holy Thursday event, as suggested by Bruteau. In the Upper Room, Jesus gathered his closest friends together as a community, taught them that the true exercise of their authority was service, and affirmed their relationship to him and to each other as that of brothers and sisters. The sharing of communion was not only in the giving and receiving of his body and blood. Communion

around the table was also expressed through discipleship, through community, and through service.

Discipleship

The vocation to the religious life begins with the sense of being called by Jesus to follow in a unique, personal, and entire way. No two vocation stories are identical because no two relationships with Christ are identical. Each of us has her own invitation story and her own story of response. Being a disciple of Jesus is personal, and thus the relationship of love between Christ and the beloved is always unique. Jesus values my giftedness, and he also values my limitations. He values my strengths as well as my weaknesses, recognizing that both are gifts from God and both have the potential to lead me either closer to God or further away. When beautification products encourage me to hide my blemishes (from myself and from others), and diet and self-help programs remind me that I am not quite who I should be, the Christ of the Upper Room says, "Come as you are. You have been chosen. You belong here—there is a place for you." The first step of discipleship in the communion paradigm is saying "yes" to Christ's invitation to come to the table. As if that weren't difficult enough, however, the second step is accepting the brothers and sisters sitting next to us. As I turn to my left and to my right, I see an unlikely set of characters that I am asked to call community. I notice one who stinks of fish, one who is so young he has to claim his stake at the head of the table, one who has a sordid history of being a liar and a cheat that really can't be forgotten, one who insists on holding the strings to the purse and dictating how its contents are spent, one whose mother is always kind of hanging around asking for special privileges for her children, one who fades into the background so easily I can't even remember his name, one whose temper flares often enough to gain herself a not-so-flattering nickname. This is a merry band of followers, to be sure. Accepting the invitation to discipleship

is about more than just me. It's also about accepting everyone else's rightful place at the table. Thus insists the communion paradigm.

From a stance of communion, I claim that you are inherently valuable and lovable, regardless of your history, your attitude, or your sin. You are my brother; you are my sister. As family, we are one. The paradigm of division would have us be ranked: the good kid, the misfit, the rebel, the pride of the family. The paradigm of division has a value scale upon which our place is determined by external codes and norms. In the communion paradigm, I am called to the table by Jesus who values me simply because he does, simply because I am. Looking to my left and to my right, I see that he values you simply because you are. The true call of communion is to be able to say to you with my own voice, "I love you; sit next to me," "I am trying to love you; sit next to me," or "You don't seem to love me; sit next to me." Can we be one big, happy family? Maybe we cannot, but what we can do is strive to be. The communion paradigm is not about perfection, remember; it's about unity. Even if unity is not attainable this side of eternity (not even Jesus could accomplish it), it is not thereby rendered worthless. We must never let the perfect be the enemy of the good.[10]

How does this apply specifically to religious life? The vow of chastity expresses our belief in our inherent value: that we are the beloved of God, and we claim God as our one, true love. We also insist that the same is true for you . . . and you . . . and you. The vow of chastity is first and foremost about love, but it is also about an expanded view of what it means to be lovable. In my profession of exclusive, complete love of God, I find that I am committed to loving God in and through each "you" I meet. You are the beloved as well. You and I are one in Christ. We are different, and we are one. Together, we

[10] English variant of an aphorism attributed to Voltaire.

form a community of disciples—unlikely characters all, possibly, but a community nonetheless.

Community

Jesus gathered the disciples in the Upper Room around one table, and Paul tells us that the community of believers who formed the early church shared all things in common. Privilege and prestige had no place in the coming kingdom of God. The one community was made up of various individuals, various traditions, and various stations in life. In giving of Christ's body and blood, no one received more and no one received the "better part" (Luke 10:42). All received of the same bread, the same cup (1 Cor 11:25). The elders didn't get first pick; the youngest didn't get the scraps. The religious elite didn't get to choose at which end of the table to recline, and the lower class didn't have to wait to be served. In communion, Jesus gave all of himself to each person—without distinction, without comparison, and without evaluation. Our society parses out who gets what, when, and why. The global refugee crisis, the growing discrepancy between rich and poor in our own nation, inadequate access to health care, food or shelter: these all demonstrate lines of privilege drawn between one group and another and drawn by one group for another.

We in religious life are not immune from drawing these lines. How many of our own religious congregations know about separate dining rooms for the professed and those in formation, accountability structures that differ depending on your level of authority, or submission in letting the loudest voices prevail over and over again? These are lines of division, not of communion. If we think, choose, speak, and act out of a communion paradigm, we will resemble the community gathered at Christ's table more closely than we will resemble the help-yourself, youngest-last buffet line that so often characterizes our convents and monasteries. At Christ's table, each received the same bread and cup passed on from Christ

through their brothers and sisters. The table is not the point, however. What is truly at issue here is how we receive one another and how we give to one another. What we have to offer has been given from Christ, and what we have to receive from each other is the very person of Christ. Can I turn to each person gathered at the table and share with you, as my brother or my sister, everything that has been given to me, the entirety of my treasure, that it might become for you life and hope and joy and peace? Can I expect the same from you? This is communion. This is true wealth: the giving and the receiving of all that is you, of all that is me, and of all we are together in Christ.

Our true wealth, our true treasure, is in and for Jesus Christ. When we profess a vow of poverty, this is our claim: that God is enough. There is no more need for hoarding or protection of comfort zones, no more need to focus on scarcity or lack. God-with-us is enough. So if I am missing something of necessity, I can turn to you, my sister, with my need, believing that you can and will provide what I am lacking. If we are both lacking, we will turn outward even further to discover where we might be filled. This turn outward is the quest for God, and as we orient ourselves together in this search, we expect that God will be found. God exists in our encounter with every "other," and so we go forth to meet God, to encounter Jesus, in the wider community. This is the stuff of mission, of our call to serve.

Service

The paradigm of communion is in essence a contemporary commitment to live according to the Holy Thursday events, where Jesus gave clear instructions for his followers to do two things: to do for one another what he did for us when he washed our feet, and to break the bread in remembrance of him. We have been speaking thus far of the latter commandment in reference to the communion paradigm. Now we turn to Jesus' question to the Twelve in the Gospel of John after he

finished washing their feet: "Do you realize what I have done for you? You call me 'teacher' and 'master,' and rightly so, for indeed I am. If I, therefore, the master and teacher, have washed your feet, you ought to wash one another's feet. I have given you a model to follow, so that as I have done for you, you should also do" (John 13:12b-15). With perfect clarity, Jesus told his disciples—and through them, tells us now—that there is a new way of being when it comes to authority and leadership: the way of servanthood. Not in Jesus' kingdom nor in communion living will a title or a position define your importance. Never again will your academic degrees or your family name provide you with greater influence. No more will your past experience or lack thereof be of any consequence. "Do you want to know how to follow me more faithfully?" Jesus asks. "Watch and learn, friend; watch and learn. I remove the outer garment, revealing that I am just like you—we are no different. No clothing, no title, no accretion or external trappings distinguish us; we are one. I take up the basin of water and a simple towel, normal stuff really, but with incredible power to cleanse and heal and soothe. I sense what you feel; I see what you need. And so I stoop to wash your feet—your dirty, swollen, blistered feet. I don't ask how you got so dirty; it is irrelevant to me. I know only that it is time for communion, and I am here to serve you, that we might come to the table together" (cf. John 13).

Pope Francis, in his apostolic visit to the United States in 2015, visited the Curran-Fromhold Correctional Facility in Philadelphia, the city's largest prison. He used the story of Jesus' washing of the apostles' feet to frame his remarks to the prisoners, most of whom were serving life sentences:

> That is why we see Jesus washing feet, our feet, the feet of his disciples, then and now. We all know that life is a journey, along different roads, different paths, which leave their mark on us. We also know in faith that Jesus seeks us out. He wants to heal our wounds, to soothe our feet which hurt from travelling alone, to wash each of us clean of the dust from

> our journey. He doesn't ask us where we have been, he doesn't question us about what we have done. Rather, he tells us: "Unless I wash your feet, you have no share with me" (John 13:8). Unless I wash your feet, I will not be able to give you the life which the Father always dreamed of, the life for which he created you. . . .
>
> The Lord tells us this clearly with a sign: he washes our feet so we can come back to the table. The table from which he wishes no one to be excluded. The table which is spread for all and to which all of us are invited.[11]

The vehicle for communion is service to one another, and this is the only justifiable use of power in the communion paradigm. Authority based on any other principle may be expedient, it may even be effective, but it is not Gospel.

So, we in religious life profess a vow of obedience. This obedience claims authority resides in servant leadership, and power must be used for the common good in order to bring about ever more authentic communion among the people of God. Does that mean no one is in charge, that everyone is equal? Jesus was neither an authoritarian nor an anarchist. The communion paradigm does not render the vow of obedience impotent with a generalized sense of authority equally distributed among members; in fact, it is just the opposite. The communion paradigm insists that true authority must be exercised by the one to whom it has been entrusted, and it must be exercised in the same fashion Jesus exercised it in the Upper Room through the washing of the feet. First, remove the separations between you and me—the outer garments. Then, find the means through which all parties can come to the table readied. Most likely this will have something to do with genuine dialogue, honesty, reconciliation, and humility from

[11] Francis, "Address of the Holy Father," Vatican Website, September 27, 2015, accessed February 16, 2017, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/september/documents/papa-francesco_20150927_usa-detenuti.html.

all parties. Finally, understand that the role of servant to the common good is shared among us, and just as the "master and teacher" has done for us, so I must be willing to do for each person in the community. Obedience, from the perspective of the communion paradigm, allows for each vowed religious to recognize that she is a single and necessary part of a much greater whole. The uniqueness of her singularity demands full, generous, and mature investment in the larger community just as surely as the common good, the common "project" of the community, requires authentic attention to the needs and particularities of each individual. There it is again: diversity forming unity, unity comprised of diversity.

We're Getting There

This may all seem relatively "pie in the sky." After all, it's virtually impossible to reconcile the diversity within myself ("I really want to eat healthier, but there's cheesecake tonight"), much less broaden it out to my religious community ("I'm pretty good at tolerating quirkiness—well, everyone's except *hers*"); and the thought of universalizing this for humanity is a nice thought, but . . . come on. So, is it even worth the attempt? The short answer is "Yes." The longer answer acknowledges that if we abandoned all things unattainable simply because of that characteristic, there would be no reason to be Christian at all, much less a consecrated religious. The practice of virtue, the practice of vow, the practice of religion itself: these are all practices. It is not about attaining perfection; it is about perfecting the practice in ways that lead us and anyone who crosses our path closer to God. It is about becoming one in Christ Jesus.

Religious life is in the midst of a paradigm shift. We in religious life must choose the direction of that shift, and communion is the most compelling, necessary, and authentic choice. Just as the Uno game last night wasn't about winning, neither is the human endeavor. Weirdly, I think that card game

had something to say about the truth of this moment, namely: It said, "Show up as yourself, engage fully with everything you've got, expect conflict, intrigue, occasional virtue, and plentiful laughter, and know that in the end we will walk away—winners and losers both—as sisters in Christ."