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Letters

Radical Reform

I read “Religious You Will Always Have With You,” by Richard Rohr, O.F.M., (10/16) with great interest. As a young religious I am constantly reading the writings of religious who have more experience than I for insight and wisdom on the vowed life. The article left me with unsettled feelings hard to describe. I am left wondering what I am to believe about the choice I have made to be a religious in the 21st century? Am I to see this step as only a stage of initiation or rather as a place for me to stand firm? I was left with more questions than answers.

While I agree that religious life is in need of renewal and clarification in our world, I also believe that young religious are bringing gifts to contribute to this renewal and clarification. If we believe that religious life has a purpose in our world today, which I believe it does, then we must have faith that the Spirit is bringing to religious life the necessary tools for rejuvenation.

I am convinced that religious life in the 21st century is more about who we are and less about what we do. As Father Rohr wrote, religious were seen as the leaven of the church for many years. We were the teachers, catechists, preachers and ministers to the faithful. Today much of this has changed, for we see an empowered laity that has taken its rightful place in ministry. So what we do is not as significant as it was years ago. Who we are is much more important in helping to clarify our future. Professing the evangelical counsels is a radical freedom from our complex power-hungry culture of individualism and materialism.

For those who are joining religious life much later in life than many of the older religious did, I think the reality is a bit different. Religious life for us is not a springboard of values and faith formation toward a future as a lay minister. Rather it is an entrance into a community of discipleship committed to a witness that our world so desperately needs. It is a resting place for our restless heart. Suggesting that religious life is simply initiation seems incomplete.

I entered the community at the age of 27 after seven years of discernment. While living the vowed life has not been the easiest, other life choices would have presented their own challenges. If I were to see this stage of my human development as merely initiation, I might as well throw in the towel. I think Christ lures me to a life deeply rooted in the Gospel, a life in which I am called to witness the radical freedom of the vowed life. Religious life is now my identity; it is my home; and it is the place from which I stand. I must see it as such and not simply as a stop along the way.

There is nothing that keeps me here in the vowed life more than my own commitment to it, but this is precisely the point. Young religious are making a deliberate and carefully discerned choice to join religious life today. We come with big ideas, restless hearts and experiences that would scandalize the older religious. Yet we are blessed to have a place within our faith community where we can find rest to be more than we imagined we could be. It is here in religious life that I hope to be challenged to grow in my life of Christ. It is here that I hope I can be a witness in our world of restless individuality and materialism.

In some ways our call as religious men and women gives us a rather simple and humble place to stand, feet firmly planted, like Mary at the foot of the cross. It is from this place that I think we will discover purpose for this life. It is from the Mount of Calvary that I have come to discover that my life as a religious is much more than initiation. It is an identity as one who is beloved.

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Present State

Thank you for the Oct. 16 issue celebrating 50 years of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious and the Major Superiors of Men Religious. I found the critique of Kenneth Briggs's *Double Crossed*, by Patricia McCann, R.S.M., to be especially interesting. I agree with her contention that the downward trend in religious life is not simply the result of sisters being victims who were betrayed by the hierarchy, as Mr. Briggs suggests. Sister Patricia contends, instead, that the cultural transformation that occurred in the last century had a major role in the present crisis in religious communities.

What is not mentioned by either Mr. Briggs or Sister Patricia, however, is that sisters were not prepared for the changes mandated by the Second Vatican Council because they were trained and immersed in pre-Vatican II theology and spirituality. The interpretation of the vows at that time, particularly the vow of obedience, while not causing sisters to become victims, did encourage them to behave in the convent like dependent children. By day sisters were in charge of hospitals, colleges, academies and a variety of other institutions. But when they returned home, they were expected to respond to the superior as children to a parent. They asked for permissions, approvals, etc., and the superior made the decisions about which requests were granted and which were not. As obedient religious, the sisters had only to acquiesce to her wishes.

Being schooled in such a mind-set, it is no wonder that sisters were unprepared for the changes that followed Vatican II. A number of them responded to the new freedom by regressing psychologically to the age they were when they entered religious life. They proceeded to go through the developmental stages they had never experienced. During that process, some sisters left communities and some behaved, temporarily at least, like rebellious teenagers. Many others took advantage of the multiple opportunities for growth offered at that time and became mature, interdependent religious at home as well as in their ministries. There can be little doubt that the behavior of some in the hierarchy toward religious, as well as the cultural transformation in our country, played a role in bringing religious life to its present state, as Mr. Briggs and Sister Patricia suggest. It seems to me, however, that pre-Vatican II spirituality, as well as a lack of understanding about basic human development, also had a significant part in situating religious life where it is today.

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