



ELEPHANTS IN THE LIVING ROOM

Website: elephantsinthelivingroom.com

SR. SANDRA SCHNEIDERS, IHM

RELIGIOUS WOMEN IN PROPHETIC MINISTRY TODAY

ST. BLASE

STERLING HEIGHTS, MI

MARCH 15, 2010



Introduction

Bishop Thomas Gumbleton

It is an honor to be able to introduce Sr. Sandra Schneiders this afternoon. Many of us here first became aware of Sr. Sandra this past year in the very insightful critiques of the action of the Vatican imposing the euphemistically, they called it, the visitation on the religious of the United States. And Sandra responded with an article that circulated, I think, mostly through e-mail to many, many people across the country. And then there was an article she wrote in the National Catholic Reporter that also got very much attention and a five-part article on-line in the Reporter that continues to get attention. And so for that reason, I think, many of us feel we have a sense of who Sr. Sandra Schneiders is.

But there is very much more to Sr. Sandra Schneiders than this most recent event in her life. She has been a professor at the Catholic Theological Union and Jesuit School of Theology in Berkley, California for over thirty years. Sandra, her early childhood was in Detroit - but first in Chicago and then in Detroit - she was at St. Gregory parish and then later at Gesu, went to parochial grade school, Immaculata High School and Marygrove College.

But she continued her education in a very extensive way, because she also, besides receiving her bachelor's degree from Marygrove, she received an M.A. from the University of Detroit in Philosophy, and later, a doctorate in Sacred Theology from the Gregorian University in Rome - and that's a pretty tough university. She came out of it with a *summa cum laude* degree - that kind of intimidates me that we have someone who is that kind of an intellectual. (Laughter) But she is a very down-to-earth person; so don't let it scare you with her degrees.

Another thing that I think is quite extraordinary about Sandra is the publications that she has done over the years. There is a list of books that she includes in her *curriculum vitae*. There are eighteen books she has written. I'll just mention a few of the titles and it will give you a sense of how comprehensive is her work in publishing over the years: *Selling All: Commitment, Consecrated Celibacy in Community and Catholic Religious Life* - that's been one of her main topics over the years: *Catholic Religious Life; New Wineskin: Re-imagining Religious Life Today*. But also, a topic that is very important to her is feminism in the Church. She has a book: *Women and the Word: the Gender of God in the New Testament and the Spirituality of Women*.

Besides the number of books that she has written, she has published in various books a chapter in eighteen different books. She's written articles - in fact, there are ten pages listing the various articles she has written over the years. She also published thirty-one tapes that we can listen and learn from her.

So her professional life has been very extensive and covered many, many topics in the Church. But most of all, she is a very dedicated woman religious, and she has recently been trying to help the whole Church understand better what religious life is, what it is intended to be, and the history of religious life in the Church. And so I think she is very capable - extraordinarily capable - to share with us this afternoon, *What Is the Spirit Saying to the Church Today?* And that is what she will be sharing with us this afternoon. And so I am very honored and glad to be able to welcome Sandra and present her to you at this time. (Applause)

Thank you, Tom. Beautiful. Good afternoon. Thank you very much for the invitation to be here. Thank you, Tom, for that gracious introduction. I'm always made a little nervous by introductions, because you always want to live up to things. But I have to say, one thing I'm grateful for is that the baptismal font is there, rather than up here, because I have enough electronic equipment in my pockets, that if I fell in, if not electrocuted, I would surely drown. But in all seriousness, I am very happy to be here with you; and I am utterly amazed that this many people on a Monday afternoon are thinking about religious matters. That's edifying, in the best sense of the word, edifying. I'd like to thank the organizers of this event: Tom Kyle, Monica Stuhlreyer, Tom, of course, and all the people responsible for this part of the program here at St. Blasé; and I'm honored. I've heard about the *Elephants in the Living Room* over the years, and I'm really honored to be a part of it, and to try to say something about what the Spirit might be saying to the Church through the experience of women religious.

Our experience at the moment, as you know, is two-fold. There is our serious, committed experience of trying to live in the Church and in the world, the vocation to which we have been called, and then there is a distraction going on in the periphery that is consuming a nearly obscene amount of energy and time. And in considering what I would share with you, I said to myself, "I'm really not interested in talking about the second of these." Hopefully it will go away quickly and leave no trace. But religious life, I hope, will never go away, and it will leave deep traces in world history and in the Church. So I want to devote my attention to religious life, and if there are questions about the investigation, and so on, or other things you want to ask about, we do have a question and answer period, and I'd be happy to share whatever I know about it. Of course, nobody knows anything about it, because they aren't talking. (Laughter) But there is a lot of conjecture about what it's about.

I have to say though, as I was reflecting on these two experiences and saying, "Now which one am I going to talk about," I was also being a little confused about *Elephants in the Living Room*, because I always thought that expression referred to topics or ideas that were present, but unarticulated, when a conversation was going on; and that systematically distorted the communication, because they were unacknowledged, and so on. I thought these *Elephants* were these topics, and so on; but I kept getting correspondence from your organization with things that said, "*When you speak to the Elephants,*" (Laughter) or, "*The Elephants are interested in hearing...*" and I'd say to myself, "Are the Elephants the topics, or are the Elephants the people?" And as I was reflecting on this, a little story was writing itself in my imagination, which probably will mediate between not only those two ideas of the Elephant, but the two topics that were floating around. So I want to share the little story with you for your amusement and relaxation.

And I called this story, *The Elephants in the Circus*.

Now once upon a time there was a town called Real World. And on the margins of the town was a Slum, full of poor people, sick people, oppressed people. No one in the Slum had enough to eat, and the children had no schools. But one day, the circus came to town. Now the circus, of course, is the zone of Unreality. It has only all-good people in it, and all-bad people. And you need these dichotomies so that you know who to clap for and who to boo. The all-good people were supernatural types, like acrobats. In gorgeous costumes, they flew through the air, because they were not bound like ordinary people by laws like gravity. And even when they made really, really, huge mistakes, there were safety nets to keep them from getting hurt. Now the all-bad people were frightening, disfigured, gravely defective, intrinsically disordered, pagan, and some even had dangerous ideas that they told to other people.

Now the bad people were kept in cages so they would not harm themselves, or lead others astray, but spectators could look at them and be thankful that they were not like them. And then, there were those baffling buffoons, the clowns, who kept popping up into view, suggesting that there was something really wrong going on, but they weren't sure exactly what. So they did not know whether to laugh or cry. So they did both, but at the

wrong things. They laughed out loud at things that were very serious and even solemn, and they lamented with big sad tears the things that were really intended for everybody's good, even if they were hurtful and unpleasant. In general the clowns kept the people from really settling down.

Once the big tent was up, the animals were brought in, in huge carts. But the elephant was so big it had to be led in on its own feet. The elephant's feet were chained so that she could not do anything original or unexpected, which of course is always very dangerous. So she was led shuffling through Real World and its Slum, where there were people who were sick with diseases that respectable people don't get, untouchable and immoral types, who created their own problems in all kinds of ways. Most of them in the Slum would have given anything to get into the circus, but they didn't have the money or influence; and besides, they were the wrong kind of people. The elephant saw it all.

The shackled elephant was a darling to the circus folks, because she was so incongruous, and incongruity is just what makes the circus work. The elephant was prepped for her act. She was dressed in an elaborate costume, a pink tutu and tights, and a tail ribbon, and a jeweled tiara with a long gauzy veil on her head to make her look like a dainty 3,000 pound ballet dancer. (Laughter) Alas, she little resembled any real possibly dangerous wild animal, such as she remembered herself to be before she was, as they say, domesticated by the circus trainers. Once in the ring her chains were removed. She was confronted by a little man in a very tall pointed hat, with a very long red cape and a jeweled staff, who drove the elephant up on a little pedestal. There she had to stand precariously on one foot, unable to make any independent move, less she fall off her pedestal, scare the audience, and the real danger, anger the little man with the staff. As she stands there, the crowd roars its approval of this scene. The elephant's domination by the trainer assures the crowd that everything is in order. They have nothing to fear from anything unexpected, because if the little man can control an elephant, certainly nothing else could get out of control in this circus.

But the elephant is thinking of the people outside the circus: the poor, hungry, diseased, oppressed, homeless people in the Slum. The elephant is thinking, "We elephants are known as very intelligent animals with stupendous memories. Why I personally can even remember things said and done 2,000 years ago. We are some of the strongest creatures in the world. We can lift beams for building a house, drag barges loaded with supplies, carry tons of food and water, bring doctors and teachers from far away, even into this remote Slum. Why we can even let children, who have never had any fun in their whole lives, ride on our heads without falling off? And we can pick a flower with our super sensitive trunk, and offer it to an exhausted woman, just to make her day."

And with these thoughts in her head, the elephant stepped down from her pedestal, took off her costume and veiled headdress, and walked out of the circus tent to see what she could do to bring life and joy to the depressed people in the Slum of Real World. There was furor in the circus tent. The little man in the tall hat and the long cape was beside himself. Brandishing his staff and demanding that the elephant get back in the ring, back in costume, back on her pedestal this instant, or something awful was going to happen. The people in the stands were divided. A few claimed that they had paid for a show, and that she had just walked out of the ring, leaving her prescribed act unperformed, and they wanted their money back. But a much larger number in the audience were fascinated by the elephant's move. They were curious and excited and wondered where she had gone with such purposeful step. They followed the elephant outside and saw what was going on; and, one by one, they began to roll up their sleeves to help the elephant help the people to help themselves. It was as if the town of Real World and its Slum was full of elephants.

Meanwhile, inside the Unreal World, the circus went on. Well, I'd like to say and everyone lived happily ever after, or even to say, "The End." But, unfortunately, I'm afraid it's not. So... (Much applause)

Some of you look like you recognize it. (Laughter) Against the background of that the topic, I've been asked to discuss with you is: *Women Religious and Prophetic Ministry Today*; and it's obviously going on in the context of this investigation. In case there are people who don't know what we're talking about, in the investigation, as Tom said, its euphemistic name is an *Apostolic Visitation*. And it was launched by Cardinal Franc Rode, the head of the Vatican Office for Consecrated Life, under which falls Religious Life in the Church. The investigation was launched without any consultation whatsoever of anybody who would be involved in it. We read about it in the newspaper the day it was launched. It was launched in January 2009, was scheduled to be carried out in three stages, and it's now in its third stage. It's supposed to terminate sometime in 2011 with an extensive report to Cardinal Rode by the investigators. However, the people being investigated will not have any access to these reports. As I say, if there are further questions, we'd be happy to deal with them.

Some of you religious, and friends of religious, have heard plenty about this. Others have probably not heard too much about it, but as I said, what I want to talk about is a much more important topic, one which has not gotten as much air time, as maybe it should have, and that is the fault of religious, to a large extent, in the decade since Vatican II - namely religious life itself. There are many people of very good will in the Church, who have great respect, and even love, for the sisters they knew in their growing up years, but who really honestly wonder about religious today. They really have serious questions, respectful questions. For example, "Where have all the sisters gone?" as one man asked me a few weeks ago. We use to see them all over the place, and I haven't seen any recently. I said, "Well it's kind of like gay people, you know, you see them all the time, you just didn't know it." And they say, "Well is it a thing of the past? Is religious life simply dying out? Does it have a future? Or is it something that had its time and now that time has passed? And if there are religious, especially women religious, what are they doing now that you don't have grade schools to staff or other jobs for them to do?" So that's one set of questions.

Other people are asking outright, "Why is the Vatican after the sisters? What have they done?" You know it's kinda like when Pilate came out and said, "I find no cause in this man. What has he done?" And they said, "We wouldn't have turned him over to you if he hadn't done something." (Laughter) So that's the answer, "What have they done, the sisters? They must have done something, or they wouldn't be after them." Some people of course say, "Well, why aren't the sisters investigating the Vatican, since that seems to be where all the problems are?" (Much applause) [I think I could probably raise a committee if I wanted to.] And other people are looking back kind of nostalgically to the Catholic ghetto like parishes that they lived in, in the 1940s and 1950s, and the Catholic schools with their cadres of 10 or 15 or 20 sisters living together in the convent, walking back and forth, two by two, and so on; and what they want to know is: "Why did the sisters stop wearing their habits and living in their convents? Don't they believe in religious life anymore?" And some people are realistically asking, "Why would a young person look at this life today? What would draw a young woman, a young man, to think about religious life?"

So, I want to talk about religious life in a way that I hope will equip you, and people that you know, to begin to answer these questions in the Church, because the only people who can help Catholics and non-Catholics understand this life, which is the oldest organized vocational life in the Church. It's older than ordained ministry. It's older than matrimony - now not older than marriage; if it was older than marriage, we wouldn't be here - but matrimony, the sacramental realization of marriage, we can only trace back to about the fourth century; ordained ministry, maybe second century. But religious life, as a life form, existed in the Church, probably from about 80 on. So it's the oldest life form in the Church, and it's still here, and we'd like to have people understand it - and understand it as prophetic. And I want to talk about it being prophetic in two ways.

In itself, the life itself is the prophetic witness in the Church, but also the ministry that is a part of that life that addresses not simply the life as one person put it, *ad intra*, but what it does in the world and in the Church as prophetic. So prophetic ministry. But first, before that, and more importantly than that, in a certain sense, prophetic life. Now in the course of the centuries, since religious life came into existence way back around 80, there have been many changes in the life form - different forms of it. It's picked up a lot of stuff going through history, which it has periodically sluffed off, and then picked up other things, and

so on. But the continuity between the life from the very beginning to right now is substantial. So it's not that various kinds of life arose, and we kind of sewed them all together, and said, "Well, they're kind of religious life. It's one life that has developed, and at times degenerated, and been reformed, and so on, and carried forward in the Church. So that's the continuity part and we're gonna talk of that.

And then, also, I want to talk about the discontinuity, the things that you might remember about religious, and that have disappeared from the scene. One of the reasons for the disappearance of some things, and the taking on of other things, in the times since Vatican II, is that, like all of the Church since Vatican II, we've been much more affected by scripture, and the teaching of the Council, than by canon law and hierarchical expectations. And the life for about a hundred years prior to the Council, religious life was very heavily influenced by hierarchical expectations - what the hierarchy wanted us to do - and it was, more or less, that theology was almost developed out of canon law. So there is a reason for the discontinuity that many people have noted. And I think, as we look at that, it will be fairly clear why the prophetic character of religious life, especially its ministerial dimension, has become a major factor in what we might call *the Council Wars*. I don't need to describe that battlefield to you, but just for the sake of clarity, I'm talking about increasing polarization in the Church between people who basically think that Vatican II was a mistake. Okay? Cardinal Rode is among them. He said that Vatican II launched the first worldwide crisis in the Catholic Church. And by crises, he didn't mean an opportunity for growth; he meant a disaster. And for the first time, it's worldwide; it affects every country in the world. And for those people, turning that tide back is of paramount importance; and unfortunately it reaches to the highest levels of the Church.

The other part of this polarity is people who believe that Vatican Council II was the most important teaching and learning moment in the history of the Church, at least since the Council of Trent, that is, over the last 500 years, and probably back even to the first councils, that something really important took place. Now this is not a minor squabble. This is a fundamental struggle over what the Church is, what the Church was meant to be, why it exists, and so on. And it's not hard to get at the one issue that is the nub of the struggle. Some people think, "Well are we going to pray the liturgy in Latin? Are we gonna slop on our knees during the Eucharist prayer when we're supposed to be being fully conscious and actively involved?" And these things serious? But the real nub of the *Council Wars* is that the two major documents of the Council:

- *Lumen Gentium*, which means "Light to the Nations," and that's the document on the Church. So it didn't say the Church is a little enclave of people who should keep themselves pure from the culture of death out there, and support each other in being special. It said the Church is to be a light to the nations.
- And the other document is *Gaudium et Spes*, on "The Church in the Modern World."

So where is the Church going to be a light to the whole world? And we're gonna see later on here that you cannot exercise a prophetic ministry unless you are one with the people to whom you are sent. And so the Church getting out of its ghetto, and getting into the world, and doing that specifically in order to be a light to the nations, to help to bring about the reign of God on earth as it is in heaven. If that's what the Church is, and that's what it is to do, as opposed to saving the souls of those who are blessed enough to be within it, that's a very serious, significant difference of understanding. And one of the reasons why religious life is suddenly at the vortex of this struggle is because religious, and especially women religious, non ordained religious, maybe, in some respects, the primary, or at least a primary carrier, of the new vision of Church. So if you can get that elephant back on its pedestal, it would be very easy to handle a lot of other things.

So, what is religious life? Religious life has been talked about as a higher form of Christian life - you've mostly heard that, I'm sure - or as a way of perfection; or as John Paul II kept putting it, a closer following of Jesus Christ. Now the problem with this position, besides the fact that it's not very well based in scripture, and it's really offensive to a lot of people, is its hierarchical and elitist take on religious life. Because, if there is a higher form of Christian life, then there's a lower form: that's you. (Laughter) If there is a way of perfection, there is a way of imperfection: that's you. Okay? If there is a closer following of Jesus Christ, then there's a more distant following of Jesus Christ. So you can see why some people might have a problem with this way of talking about religious life.

There are problems with this, partly because, obviously, not every individual religious lives religious life in the full white heat of their vocation - some of them really do very bad things. So, if it is a way of perfection, how do you explain that? But quite apart from the individuals who might not be living up to life and to perfection in a higher form and a closer following, and so on, there really is a problem with the very notion of a hierarchy of vocations in the Church. This elitist language was trying to get at something that unfortunately the institutional Church has not known very well how to talk about; and that is, distinctiveness; that when something is distinct from something else, you have to distinguish it. You have to find that which is true of this, and is not true of that. And unfortunately, about the only way we've known how to do that is to say, "Well, if two things are not the same, then one must be higher than the other; or one must be fuller than the other; or one must be better than the other; or one must be more important than the other." In other words, distinctiveness got equated with hierarchical arrangement. And so the only way we knew how to say religious life was really different, let's say, from married life, from matrimony, was to say, and Trent did say this, Trent actually defined this, that religious life was superior to matrimony. Okay? They're trying to say, now when Paul was trying to talk about what eventually became life forms in the Church, he said about matrimony, about marriage, actually which becomes matrimony later, he says "The union of the spouses in marriage is a sacramental revelation of the union between Christ and the Church." Now you can't get much better than that. But he also said "However, if I, Paul, had my druthers, I would have everybody make the same choice that I, Paul, made: namely, to remain celibate." And you say, "Paul, make up your mind," you know, "Is it marriage or?" But what Paul ended up saying was, nevertheless, the best vocation for anybody is the one to which they are called by God. Now actually, that is a very good way of presenting life forms and vocations in the Church: that they have distinctive messages; they make distinctive revelations in the Church; but that doesn't mean that one is better than the other.

The gospels describe to us various ways in which people follow Jesus. Jesus had many, many, many disciples; and they were related to him in various ways. So he had disciples who were married; disciples who weren't married, disciples who were house holders, disciples who were itinerate, who followed him around in his own homeless type of life. He had people that he called from their day job; he said, "Give up the job you got and come follow me." He had other people. He said, "Stay in your day job, but do it differently." So he had all kinds of different types of disciples; and I think a classic example, taken from both Matthew and Luke, is the two tax collectors. With the tax collector, Matthew, he said, "Leave your tax job and come follow me." And to Zaccheus, he doesn't say, "Stop being a tax collector;" he says, "Be a good tax collector." There are many other cases where we could say these people - Martha and Mary, for example - if Martha and Mary had not remained householders, Jesus would have had no place to go on his day off; and he would have had no place to hide out right before his passion. So they were tremendously important. But so was Mary Magdalene, who went about with him, like James and John and Peter, in his itinerate ministry. Was one of these better than the others? Nope! No, they're different.

We ask the question then: "How is religious life distinctive in the Church?" Jesus did not found religious life. Jesus did not establish a religious order. But when we look back at the gospel and say, "What type of discipleship does religious life most resemble," it probably is the itinerate band of disciples who went about with Jesus on a 24/7 basis, and whom he sent out before him to prepare the way before him, and come back and tell him what kind of success, or not success, that they had had. He takes them aside many times to explain particularly difficult things to them. But, above all, he invites them to leave all things to take up this kind of discipleship. So they're to leave their nets, and their boats, and their fathers, and their lands, and so on, to leave all things as he had. Jesus had no form of income; he had no source of income to share a common purse with him; not to marry or to leave their spouses - and that leaves us with a little problem in the New Testament - but these are people who do not have family as a primary determinant of their behavior - so they don't have spouses, children and so on. When Jesus talks about himself having no place to lay his head, no home of his own, even though he visited people and, obviously, stayed in homes; so no money, no family, no home, and to be constantly on the move, especially in Mark's gospel, Jesus went immediately here, and then he went immediately there. "And we can't stay here for more than a couple days; we must go on to every town in Israel, because that's the reason for which I was sent." So he's a man on a mission, and sometimes with their tongues hanging out, the disciples are trying to keep up with him as he is trying to reach the whole of the people of God, the whole of Israel.

So all the disciples are called to share in Jesus' life; some were called to share in his life style, his homelessness, his lack of financial or economic wherewith, his itinerancy, his constant traveling about, his total involvement in the preaching of the gospel to the exclusion of any other kind of activity. So from the life that all share, to a particular lifestyle; and then that lifestyle gave rise in the Church's history to a sociologically visible, in the Church, life form. And that's what I'm trying to get to. Religious life is a life form. Its best analog is not as some people think: ordained ministry. It's matrimony; and we will see why, over, and over, and over again; both of which are life forms in the Church.

Now we used to talk about states of life. Well, I don't think that's the best language today, because it has a kind of static-ness about it. You get into it like a cookie cutter and shut the ... But a life form, I think, is a little more organic way of talking about something that is permanent - covers every aspect of a person's life. There aren't any pieces that aren't related to the life form itself. And this life form that we call today religious life went through many stages:

- Consecrated virgins in the early Church.
- People who went out, women, men, who went out into the desert to live as hermits, especially in the third and fourth century.
- People who then who banded together in monastic communities from the fifth century on.
- Later on mendicant forms of the life.

So there have been many different forms of this life form in the course of the history of the Church. Most of these earlier forms still exist, but in smaller numbers; and the life form that you're most familiar with, and that I'm involved in, and most of the religious here: Apostolic Religious Life. That began to emerge as one of the forms of the life form of religious life in the fifteen hundreds. And it kind of clawed its way into the light of day, and got shoved back into the cloister, and it got out again, and got shoved back again over a 400 year history; and until in nineteen hundred that life form was recognized as religious life. So it took 400 years to get from the first experiments with it to official Church recognition. And that's the form that most of us are familiar with. So the sisters and brothers who staffed your grade schools and high schools and colleges, and that have served you in hospitals and social services, and so on, belong to that form of the life. The current Vatican investigation very, very strangely, is concentrated on only women, even though there are men in this form of life, and only members of Apostolic Religious Congregations; so not monastic groups, and only ones in the United States. Even if the same order has a province in this country, and a province ten miles over the Canadian border, and their motherhouse in Rome, the motherhouse is not being investigated, the Canadian province is not being investigated, but the American one is. Go figure. (Laughter)

So what belongs constitutively to this life form? What makes it up? This life form, because of the fact that it followed on the heels of monasticism, carried forward some of the characteristics of monastic life, specifically the wearing of uniform dress, which came to be called habit, which just simply means a costume. Okay? So all the members wore the same dress; and they lived in the same enclosed place that only the monks or the nuns were allowed to go into. Seculars couldn't enter that enclosure. So habit, enclosure, and then a daily routine of prayer, and work, and eating, and recreating, and so on, where everybody did basically the same thing at the same time. Now those are not constituent elements of religious life, as such. They are elements of monastic religious life, just like living in the desert is not essential to religious life. It is if you happen to be a desert monastic. So when the renewal began after Vatican II - actually it began before Vatican II, but really kind of got into full motion after the Council - these features, relatively quickly, were first renewed, reformed, reformulated, modified, but very quickly they kind of fell away. And some people thought the life itself had gone out of existence, because they really associated these external forms of observance with the life itself. They're not constitutive of religious life; and we have not lost anything by not wearing a habit, not living in a convent, and so on. But that raises the question, "Well if that's not what makes religious, religious, what does?"

Three things are constitutive of religious life:

- **The first** - and again here's the comparison with marriage - the first is **perpetual**, that is, life long, public profession of the vows; so marriage vows for married people; religious vows for religious people. And it's not a temporary commitment, it's a permanent commitment. It's not a private commitment. It's a public commitment in the Church. The Church has a right to expect of people who sacramentize their marriage certain things. The Church has a right to expect of religious certain things. And there are specific vows for example in the classical form: "I take you, so and so, as my lawful wedded spouse, for better or for worse, in sickness and in health, in riches and poverty." Now that doesn't mean if I can find something that's not included in those three, that's okay. What it means is: I intend the whole enchilada. I intend a life with you for the rest of my life, and your life, that will, no matter what happens, nothing's going to break it up. Religious are saying, "I intend my whole life, as long as I shall live, to be given to Christ, for the sake of the reign of God, in this world, without any holds barred.

Now how do religious say it? They don't say for better or worse, in sickness and in health. They say, "Consecrated celibacy, poverty and obedience:" and those are not that easily understood by people who don't live the life. First of all, consecrated celibacy has absolutely nothing to do with mandated singleness. There's no connection at all between the singleness that is required for ordination in the western rite and the consecrated celibacy that's freely chose by religious.

The consecrated celibacy of the religious is analogous to the choice of one's spouse in marriage. In other words, it's somebody saying, "What do I want to do over my whole life with my affectivity; with my capacity to love. What do I want to do? I want to give it to Bill. I want to make a family with him. I want to have children with him. I want to raise those children with him." And that will mean that, you know, Tom, and Dick, and Harry, and so on, and John, are out of the picture. And somebody will way who would ever want to do a thing like that? So many men; so little time. (Laughter) That's not what a married person is thinking when they get married. They want to have a relationship, an exclusive relationship with Bill, that fulfills their whole heart's desire. And that doesn't mean they won't relate to these other people. It means they won't relate to them the way they relate to Bill. Now that also doesn't mean that there they'll never be a time in their marriage when some of these others won't look a whole lot more attractive than Bill at five in the morning. And that's when the marriage goes through ups and downs.

For religious, they're making exactly the same choice. "What do I want to do with my capacity to love, with my relational capacity? I want to give it entirely to Christ for the sake, not of a family, of our children, but the reign of God in this world." And if somebody says, "Well, that means you can't have children; you can't have a family." That's like saying, "Well, what about Tom, and Dick, and Harry. The person is saying, "Yes, I'm interested in all of these aspects of human life; but I've chosen to do this with my ability to love." And that is a calling and a gift, a charism we call it, a grace of the Holy Spirit, calling a person to do this; and that's where their happiness lies, just as the wife's happiness lies with Bill. And that's why I say, "It has nothing to do with anybody saying, "If you want to be a nun, you gotta give up marriage and kids,"" and so on. And so if you are ready to make all these sacrifices, you can be a nun? No! We don't make a profession of consecrated celibacy to make sacrifices for Jesus, any more than somebody gets married to Bill to make sacrifices of all the other men in the world. I hope that part is clear. So, it's not an entrance requirement for something else, like religious life. And that's why I say it's not at all the same thing as an entrance requirement to ordained ministry, to which a person really is called, when they're not called to celibacy. So that's a major difference. So move consecrated celibacy over to its proper analog, marriage.

- **Religious also vow poverty.** And just as celibacy is about what do I do with my capacity to love, with my heart, poverty is about how am I going to relate to material goods? How am I going to relate to the economic order? And people look around and say, "Well all the religious I know got enough clothes to wear; they've got a car if they need it; they've got a place to live; and they eat three times a day. There are a lot of people who'd pay for that kind of poverty. This is poverty?" Religious do not vow destitution, okay? And that's really, really important. Jesus did not come to make people poor. He came to abolish poverty; and that's what we are about. That's what we all should be about: that there would be no Slum outside of Real World; that there would be no

people who are excluded from what they need to live. And so, part of what we are doing is taking up Jesus' prophetic calling: "The spirit of the Lord is upon me. The spirit has anointed me to preach good news to the poor."

Now poverty is not good news to the poor. The abolition of poverty is good news to the poor. So religious do not vow destitution. We're not in the business of increasing the number of poor people in the world by adding ourselves to the ranks. This is no help. But what we do do by a vow of poverty is, we decide that we will never own anything, that individually, we will never own anything. So, even if I were teaching at a very rich institution, which I'm not, that paid me a huge salary, I would not be one penny richer at the end of a 30 year career than I was when I started. Anything I earn goes immediately and directly into my religious congregation. And so does any gifts, any salaries, any honoraria, any book royalties, any anything that any of us in the congregation that is given to us, goes immediately into the congregation. So we have no control over it. In other words, religious vow is possessionlessness - not to possess, not to possess anything.

Well what does that allow? It allows us, like Jesus and his disciples, to have a common purse. that whether somebody is earning much or receiving much from their family, or whatever, it's going into a common purse. And the purpose of that common purse is to support the congregation. So educate our newer members; take care of our elderly members; support ministries that can't pay at all, in Haiti, for example; to enable us to carry out the mission of the ministry which we have. Now, if there is not enough in the common purse, then all of us will eat less, and drive less, and so on. If there is more in the common purse than we need, then we give it away, because it's not ours. In other words, capitalism is off our radar screen. We are not acquiring anything for ourselves. And so, if we have an overabundance, and anytime that a religious monastery or order has amassed large sums, and that has happened in history, almost immediately that congregation or monastery is in big trouble; and if it is not reformed, it usually goes out of existence. And the saints say this: "Nothing is more dangerous to a religious congregation or a monastery than wealth." But that's not that we say we won't touch it. What we say is we want to funnel it to people who need it. So, poverty.

- **And then thirdly**, there's another coordinate of human existence which is tremendously important and that is power. So sex, money and power. And we handle the issue of power by a vow of obedience. Now, the vow of obedience doesn't mean that there's one person in the congregation that gets to tell everybody else what to do. Unfortunately, religious life was for about several hundred years, since the Council of Trent, more or less modeled on this monarchical triangle, this hierarchical structure, that unfortunately the Church through the Vatican took on where you have one person at the top, with a couple subordinates here, and a few, they have a few more subordinates here down to the great unwashed, and they have no power at all. That's us in the Church; and, of course, one of the things that happened at Vatican II was that that great unwashed began to wake up and say, "Wait a minute! How come we have no power?" Now a religious congregation is not organized that way, should never have been organized that way, because we're all equals. There aren't any higher positions.

We elect people to lead us at a given time; and when they finish serving that way, they go back into the ranks, and somebody else is asked to do that. But the operation of obedience is putting all our power in common, to discern what God is calling us to do, individually and corporately, and then to carry it out. So our choice with regard to power, like with regard to money, like with regard to our affectivity, is very counter-cultural. It's very contrary to the way these things are handled in secular society. So what are religious doing? They're structuring their life the same way married people structure their life, primarily by what they decide to do about relationships, material goods and power. And the way we choose to organize those things is so that our life itself, within the congregation, will be a realization of the reign of God in this world, that we will live the reign of God 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 52 weeks a year, all of our lives, so that it will be a prophetic proclamation that the reign of God in this world is possible. And that's what makes it prophetic in itself before we do anything.

Now the way the life is structured, then creates a certain kind of community, a certain way of living and being together, and that community is meant to reflect the community that Jesus called together when he said, you know, "Who are my mother, who are my brothers?" I don't decide that on the basis who's related to me by blood. "Those who hear the word of God and keep it, these are brother, and sister, and mother to me." "And among you," he says to his disciples, every time he says to them, "what are you talking about?" It seems, they are talking about the same thing: "Who's more important? Who gets to sit on your right hand or left hand? Who's going to be closer to you?" And Jesus keeps saying to them, "It shall not be so among you. That's not the kind of community I have in mind. Rather, if you want to be a first class disciple, you wash people's feet. You take the lowest place at the table. You become like the little child. You take on the role that I take on, because I am among you as one who serves, not as the one who gives the orders."

So religious are trying to form a community that really looks like the kind of community that Jesus was asking his disciples to form. And it looks like that within itself, and to others. So it's a community of those who hear the word of God and keep it, and in which each member seeks the lowest place, and thereby binds the community together by one force only, namely faith lived in love. So, as with marriage, this community then becomes the primary affective horizon of all of its members. When people get married, that family they found, husband, wife, children, extended family, that becomes the affective horizon of their life. That is the primary value that everything else will serve. And the same thing for religious. Their religious community, rather than their family of origin, rather than their friends, rather than their colleagues at work, and so on, the primary affective horizon of their life is their religious community. Now that doesn't mean that they don't love their family, of course, that they don't love their colleagues, their friends and so on, but those are not primary.

So a certain community is formed; and that community that expresses itself, this is the **third characteristic of the life in ministry**, which is not simply an apostolate. We used to talk about apostolic religious life. People of a certain age here - and it looks like most of you qualify - can remember back to when we talked about the lay apostolate. Remember the lay apostolate? The definition of the lay apostolate was, it was the participation of the laity in the mission and ministry of the hierarchy. So the implication is, in the Church, mission and ministry belong to the hierarchy; and they can delegate it or share it with, or send other people out to carry out parts of; but the people they send out have no initiative authority on their own. All of the initiative and authority in ministry belongs to the ordained, who then share it one way or another. And they included in that religious. So the diocese wants to set up a school, they write to Mother General and say, "Send us 10 sisters, who will teach in the school." And the pastor will decide the curriculum, the color of the paint on the convent refectory walls, and everything else, including what the sisters will do Sunday night at recreation, namely: count the collection. (Laughter) So the priest, going up to the bishop, and then, of course, up to the Vatican, funnels a ministry to the laity, among whom were included the religious. So the apostolate was being sent by somebody who had a mission, sending somebody who didn't have a mission, to carry out part of the mission of somebody who did have a mission.

Now Vatican II introduced a marvelous recall to an earlier understanding of mission and ministry by saying, "No!" The laity do not minister by permission of the ordained. They minister out of their baptism and confirmation; that by baptism and confirmation, they are incorporated into Jesus Christ, Prophet, Priest and King; and they act out of that identity. They carry out that mission which is theirs. They don't do it by permission. And of course religious woke up at the same time as the rest of the laity and said, "Hey! Wait a minute, where do we get our mission?" Well, obviously, baptism and confirmation, but also profession. Our baptism and confirmation is shaped by our religious profession; and that in turn is shaped by the charism of our congregation, the special take on the gospel that gave rise to this congregation. And we're sent into mission, not by the bishop, not by the pastor, but by our own leaders, who ratify the choice that the whole community as a whole makes about what we will do in ministry. So in other words, something was going on with all of the laity, that also went on with the regard to religious; and this is part of the problem that the hierarchy is having with women religious: that they use to have us as an obedient workforce, who could be simply told what to do, didn't have to be paid, supported, or anything like that. So you can do a lot of things, if you have a workforce, you know, of thousands of people whom you really don't need to pay, you don't need to give any retirement to, or any benefits, or

anything; and you can tell them what to do, and they have to do it in virtue of holy obedience. So what you tell them to do is what God wants them to do. It's a sweet deal. (Laughter)

It happens to be a sweet deal rooted in very bad theology, and not rooted in Scripture at all. So when women religious especially began to - they never really went after men religious in the same way, because they were always kind of afraid that maybe these guys might be somewhat on the same level with them, because maleness was intrinsic to the notion of ordained ministry, but the women - now when the women, of course, woke up and said, "Wait a minute! No! We minister out of our profession, shaped baptism, and confirmation according to the charism of our own congregation; and we are not in the chain of command of the ordained ministry." So it's not pope, cardinals, bishops, monsignors, priests, sisters. No, sisters aren't part of that. So that chain of command doesn't affect us. When people say "Well you're working for the Church aren't you?" "But all of this diversity,": Paul says, "has to be coordinated for the good of the body as a whole." And I can tell you, you need your little toe in a certain sense as much as you need your eyes. If you've ever had something really wrong with a toe you know it can take over your life, until something's done about it. So as Paul said, "Even the least important seemingly members of the body are in fact very integral to the well-being of the whole."

So, ministry is intrinsic to religious life. It's the third component. And it is not an apostolate in the sense of being sent by the clergy. So religious are not agents of the institutional Church. It's not our job to make people behave, to make sure that they know what their obligations are, and we see to it that they fulfill them. Now anybody who went to Catholic grade school will say "What? Wasn't that what the sisters were all about, seeing to it that everybody marched to confession on Saturday?" Yes, that was part of the misunderstanding of many things about our life. But we aren't agents of the institution. We are called to be the compassionate presence of Christ in a prophetic mode, a charismatic mode, not an institutional mode.

So, the prophetic character of religious life is first of all a life itself. Now, when we talk about the ministry, then what the religious does, both the individual religious and the congregation, we hark back, and many rules have this as part of the preamble of their rules, the very passage that we heard read from Luke 4: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. God has sent me to proclaim release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." That's our job, not seeing to it that people behave and go to church. Now, when we look at Jesus, this is Jesus prophetic ministry, if we say our prophetic ministry is to do this, to be this, when we look at Jesus, and we say, "Jesus was Prophet, Priest and King." But in Jesus' historical life, Jesus was not a priest. He was no kind of religious official. He was not a priest. He was not a high priest. He was not a scribe. He was not a Pharisee. He was not a rabbi. Jesus was not any kind of an institutional official. He was a charismatic, prophetic figure in Judaism, but he was not historically, what today, we would call ordained ministry. He was also very leery about any talk of kingship. When Pilate said, "So you are a king?" and he says, "That's your language. You're trying to apply a category to me that doesn't apply, because, my kingdom is not of this world." And when they came to try and take him by force, and to make him king, he disappears into the crowd, so nobody can get their hands on him. He doesn't become a king historically until he's raised on the cross, crowned with thorns, naked, dying for the people who belong to his reign. So if we're talking about the historical Jesus, the only one of these three that he claimed was prophet. And he was quite clear about that. He talked about being a new Jonah, giving the sign of Jonah. He compares himself to Moses. Other people compare him to Jeremiah, to Elijah, to Elisha, to Amos, to Hosea. He's in the train, in the tradition, of the Old Testament prophets, and particularly Moses, because Moses is the one who sees God face to face and forms the chosen people.

Now if we're saying religious life is a prophetic life form, it's a charismatic form of life in the Church. It has nothing to do with the official structure of the Church; and it is a ministry, first and foremost, to the people of God. And it has certain characteristics. One of those characteristics, which you see clearly in the life of Jesus, is mystical prayer. Where does the prophet get what it is that the prophet brings to the people in contact with God, in face to face communion with God, every day, every day, every day? So the mystical union of the prophet with God is the foundation of everything.

Secondly, the prophet must be one of the people. Prophets are not piped in from somewhere else to deliver God's message. Moses was one of the people. It was when he discovered that he was a Hebrew, not an Egyptian, that he was able to be sent by God to be the prophet to Israel, to the Hebrews, who become Israel. So being one of the people, and when the people say, "Why aren't the nuns wearing their habit, living in special houses and being separate?" Partly, because, we've come to a realization of this, that being one of the people is critical to our prophetic vocation.

And thirdly, the job of the prophet: unlike the king, who gives the commands, or leads the army, or even the priest or the religious official who officiates at liturgies, and so on, the job of the prophet is to read the signs of the times. Now, "the signs of the times:" that expression comes from Jesus. He said, "You people know how to read the signs in the skies. You know when it's time to sow. You know when it's time to harvest. You know when it's gonna rain. But you don't know how to read the signs of the times." You don't know what's going on. The job of the prophet is to help people interpret what's going on. And we could say, "What's going on with health care? What's going on with immigration? What's going on with two wars? What's going on with racial segregation? What's going on?" That calls for the action of God's people in this world. And the prophet plays a special role in discerning the signs of the times, because the prophet doesn't have family, economic concerns, and so on. The prophets are supposed to be doing this full time with all of their mind.

So the prophet is not dealing with things in the abstract, with laws, or with teachings, or with theological positions. The prophet is dealing with where the rubber hits the road, where, whatever it means to be a Christian, has to be figured out in the here and now with regard to the actual situations in which we are. For the prophet, then, the business of mediating this three-way conversation between God, the people, and the concrete historical social situation, the prophet is in that mix as a kind of compass needle, constantly pointing to God, sometimes in a very irritating way, saying, "Where's God in all of this? Where's God in a capitalist society? Where is God in a war making society? Where is God in a society where millions of people don't have access to health care? Where is God in this?" And people are saying, "Don't bring God into this. We have separation of Church and State. God doesn't have anything to do with it." And the prophet says, "As long as I'm here, God has something to do with it." And that's why they are very annoying and often they get into trouble. In other words, they will not get up on their pedestal on one foot and stay up there. They get down and mix with nitty-gritty reality. And I think one of the best examples of this life of Jesus is his encounter with the Scribes and Pharisees, when they bring him a woman caught in adultery, where the abstract laws and so on, are absolutely clear. Adultery is a capital offense in Judaism. The woman committed adultery; she was caught in the act. And Moses' law is clear: that such a person is to be stoned to death. So open and shut case! They bring the woman to Jesus and say, "Right?" And Jesus says, "Well the law, that's right. The punishment, that's right. The crime, yes." He says, "Well, I have just one problem. Who's qualified to carry out the sentence?" Well, obviously, somebody who shouldn't be stoned under the same law. And all of a sudden, all the people with the rocks decide that they need to spend more time with their families. (Laughter) And so Jesus looks at the woman and says, "Has no one condemned you?" And she says, "No one, Lord." Who's qualified to carry out the sentence? The one standing there with her. And he says, "Then neither do I." Okay, that's the prophet at work. Okay, you see the institution at work say this is what right. Now Jesus does not say adultery's okay. He doesn't say no penalty should ever be applied. He doesn't say to the woman, "Go and have a good time. I can get you off anytime." That's not what he is saying. What he is saying is: when the law encounters a real human being, in a real situation, maybe the foregone conclusions isn't so foregone. This is the job of the prophet.

Now Walter Bruggeman, who has written a great deal, Old Testament scholar on prophecy says, The prophet's task is two-fold. The first thing the prophet does - think of a clown - the first thing a prophet does is lament, weep big tears about what? About what's going on. The prophet is looking at the situation: all these children with no health care; all of these tens of thousands of people coming back from a useless war with their heads screwed up, with their arms and legs blown off; all these families ruined, and the prophet is weeping. Now why is weeping publicly very important? Because it is saying, "Things are not all right. There is something wrong with this." And instead of waving the flag and saying, "Aren't we wonderful, we are freeing the world." They're saying, "You may be freeing the world, but the human wreckage makes me weep." Which brings in the question, "What's going on?" Because if everybody is not happy about it - so, for example, the fact that women religious have been doing an awful lot of public

lamenting about this investigation, and the people who are conducting the investigation are being made very uncomfortable by that, because it is suggesting there is something wrong with this circus.

But it's not enough just to say there's something wrong. The prophet also has to energize hope in the people that things could be different. And where does the prophet get the resources for hope? From the experience of the people with God over centuries. So the prophet is saying, "If God has dealt with you in the past this way, if God desires your liberation, if God desires the liberation of all people, there is power available to make things different." And so the prophet is both saying there's something wrong but also saying there's something you can do about it. Now that's the job of the prophet. It's not the job of the prophet to see to it that everybody behaves.

Now the context of this struggle that's going on is the situation in which we find ourselves, it's a very troubled world we live in. There is a heck of a lot of evil in this world. Things are not right. But there are people who are saying that things can get better, like all the people in this room, I'm sure, are part of that group that is saying, "We can do something about this." Now Jesus said on the eve of his passion - it is very clear in John's gospel - it's presented very clearly that, "If they hated me, they will hate you also. Those who are coming to take me tonight and kill me will come after you the same way." If you are a prophet in the footsteps of this prophet, you will have a prophet's fate. And that fate is a cross. And he said, in particular, "It will be the people in the Church, in the synagogue." He says, "The members of the synagogue will take you; they will flog you; they will put you to death; and when they do, they will think they are giving glory to God." Now we don't think that should happen to us. We think that if we are doing the right thing, people should approve of us; especially holy people should approve of us; and Jesus says, "No! It's not going to be that way. The sign that you are doing what you are suppose to be doing as a prophet is precisely that you will be disapproved of. And that you will be persecuted; and that you may even be killed. And when that happens to you, know that you are following me."

Now this is where religious are today. They are re-appropriating their prophetic identity and their prophetic ministry; and they are reaping the rewards of a prophet, the fate of the prophet. So are there people who are after us? You bet! Is that a bad thing? At one level it is very uncomfortable. Is it a bad thing? No! Because I've always said, "The thing you want to be most careful about in our line of work is who approves of you." (Laughter) But who disapproves of you can tell you that you are doing exactly what Jesus would be saying: "Well done good and faithful servant. There's a place for you where I ended up, which is the cross and resurrection." So the present polarized situation in the Church that we talked about, where are religious? They are very strongly at the pole of carrying forward Vatican Council II, that is, an understanding of the Church as called to be a *light to the nations*; and that nations means the world, not the Church, not a ghetto, not an enclave.

So what is the Spirit saying to the Church? "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor." God has sent me "to proclaim release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." Thank you. (Standing Applause)

Transcribed by
Bew Parker
20100407