

THE COUNCIL 836090 AND RELIGIOUS LIFE

A COMMENTARY ON THE DECREE ON THE ADAPTATION AND RENEWAL OF THE RELIGIOUS LIFE

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On October 28, 1965, Pope Paul VI at a public meeting of the Second Vatican Council formally promulgated five documents which had been prepared, discussed and voted upon by the bishops of the Council. Among these five documents was the Decree on the Adaptation and Renewal of Religious Life. This Decree sets forth general norms or directives to guide Religious in their program of renewal.

The question of adapting the life of Religious to the needs of the present day has been a topic of discussion for the past fifteen or twenty years. At the First Congress of the States of Perfection held in Rome in 1950 the theme was: "The Adapted Renewal of the States of Perfection." At the various congresses of Religious men and women held in the United States over the past decade this same theme has been discussed from various aspects. As a result a number of communities have already begun a program of adaptation, particularly in the United States. However, with the proclamation of this conciliar Decree, Religious now have an official set of norms.

The very title of the Decree indicates a two-phased program

to be undertaken. To renew means to make new again; to restore to freshness or vigor. To adapt is to bring into agreement or harmony. This is, in fact, the overall objective of the Church's entire program of reform, as Pope Paul VI said when he opened the second session of the Council in 1963:

"The reform at which the Council is aimed is not, therefore, a turning upside down of the Church's present way of life or a breaking with what is essential and worthy of veneration in her tradition, but it is rather an honoring of tradition by stripping it of what is unworthy or defective so that it may be rendered firm and fruitful."

In relation to Religious life, the reform which the Council contemplates is not a turning upside down of Religious life or a breaking with what is essential to the nature of the life or worthy of veneration. But the Council does desire that Religious life strip itself of what is unworthy, defective or useless in these modern times. All the provisions of the Decree have in mind, in one way or another, this two-phased program: a constant return to the source of Christian life and the original spirit of the Religious community, as well as an accommodation to the conditions of our day.

The Decree does not approach Religious life from a juridical point of view, as the Code of Canon Law of necessity does. The Decree considers Religious life from a theological, spiritual, psychological and pastoral point of view. Moreover, the Decree restricts itself to general norms. It recognizes that each Religious community has its own physiognomy, its own vocation, its own charism, as it were. Consequently, the task of renewal will be left to each Religious community, using these general norms as guide lines.

Since the Decree is not juridical in form, it does not legislate renewal, but each community must, if it wishes to be faithful to the Church, assume the responsibility. It is clear from this Decree, as well as from other documents issued by the Council, that the Religious life is not a mere appendage, something loosely connected to the fringe of the Church's life. Rather, the Religious

life is an integral part of the Mystical Body, so much so that the Decree states: "The more fervently they (Religious) are joined to Christ by this total life-long gift of themselves, the richer the life of the Church becomes and the more lively and successful its apostolate." Given this sacred role in the Church, no Religious community can excuse itself from the Church's program of renewal.

Not only must each community be zealous in immersing itself in the program, but each individual Religious must give full cooperation. However, the program of renewal must be carried out under the guidance and direction of the competent authorities, especially the general chapters of Religious communities.

The first objective of renewal within a Religious community must be to encourage its members to seek in their daily lives a more profound union with God. To this end they must cultivate both the spirit and practice of prayer, having daily recourse to the Scriptures, meditation, participation in the liturgy, especially the Mass. Whatever structural changes are made, whatever adjustments to modern needs are introduced, they will be ineffectual unless there is a renewal of the spirit. The Decree considers this so essential that it says it takes precedence over even the active ministry.

Each Religious community has a special nature, a particular aim, a personal spirit, a specific approach to holiness and the apostolate. These form the patrimony of each community, and the Decree directs that these should be fostered. As a result Religious communities will have to ask themselves if they are faithful to the spirit of their institute; and they must endeavor to renew this spirit.

In order to accomplish this, however, they must be certain that they know the mind and spirit of their founder. Several Religious communities which have already made efforts at renewal have discovered, after careful scientific study of the life and writings of their founder, that the original spirit had become distorted or beclouded. Practices and customs, through the course of time, had been added which were not at all in keeping with the original intent of the founder.

Moreover, although the spirit, the nature, the purpose of the community should not change, its way of living these essentials can and should change. They should be modified and adjusted to meet the circumstances of the day. Because something was good, useful and suitable in the seventeenth century, it does not necessarily follow that it is still so in the twentieth century. This is also the mind of the Decree.

Religious communities are directed to examine their manner of living, praying, working, their rules and constitutions, the manner of governing, even their Religious habit. All of these are to be considered in the light of the physical and psychological conditions of the present-day Religious, as well as the needs of the apostolate, the social, cultural and economic situations. No doubt some communities, as a result of these examinations, will find it necessary to distribute responsibility more widely, thereby eliminating the excessive centralization which is sometimes found. The principle of subsidiarity mentioned in the encyclicals, *Quadragesimo Anno* and *Mater et Magistra*, certainly has validity in Religious life.

Similarly, Religious superiors should exercise their authority, according to the Decree, out of a spirit of service, respecting always the human dignity of the subject. Superiors should gladly listen to their subjects and foster harmony among them, preserving, however, the superior's authority to decide and command. At the same time, subjects are reminded that they should obey with their intellects, wills, gifts of nature and grace. Such religious obedience, the Decree stresses, in no way lessens human dignity.

In their program of self-examination, communities will have to give special attention to the practice of poverty. The individual Religious, as well as the community as a whole, should practice poverty in such a way that each actually gives witness to the world of his trust in Divine Providence. The Decree urges Religious to avoid every appearance of luxury, excessive wealth and the accumulation of goods.

The Decree provides that the already existing types of Re-

ligious communities are to continue: contemplative, monastic, apostolic, etc. Each is to maintain and renew its original vocation, but all are to adjust to the needs of the day. Strictly contemplative orders, although they are to adjust their manner of living to present-day circumstances, are still to maintain their life of withdrawal and contemplative practices.

In so providing, the Council gives evidence of its appreciation of the value of these orders to the Church. Hence, the Decree says: "These offer to God a sacrifice of praise which is outstanding. Moreover, the manifold results of their holiness lend luster to the People of God which is inspired by their example and which gains new members by their apostolate which is as effective as it is hidden."

In apostolic communities the works of charity and the ministry are, according to the Decree, of the very nature of such communities. Therefore, there should be no conflict between the works of the ministry and the spiritual life of the Religious. One should inspire and complement the other. These Religious are entitled to a regular community life, but the daily regulation should not be so drawn up as to constitute an obstacle to the apostolate, for example in schools, hospitals, social service centers, etc.

The Decree praises and encourages conferences of major superiors. In the United States there are two such conferences: one for the major superiors of congregations of men, and one for the major superiors of congregations of women. These conferences can be effective in bringing about a better distribution of personnel, eliminating duplication, lessening the unhealthy spirit of competition which sometimes exists, and better coordinating the various works of Religious. The Decree also encourages these conferences to cooperate with the episcopal conferences in those things that concern the apostolate. This latter provision will lead to a more effective and efficient cooperation between Religious and the bishops.

The success of the renewal of Religious life will depend on many factors. One of the most important will be the education of

Religious, especially Sisters and non-clerical Religious. It is for this reason that the bishops have insisted in this Decree that Religious should not be assigned to apostolic works immediately after the novitiate. They must be given further religious and apostolic formation, instruction in arts and science, and when necessary they should obtain degrees. It is obvious that if Religious are to adjust to the needs of the times, they must know something about these needs. Many Religious communities in the United States have already established post-novitiate houses of formation.

Finally, since Religious have such an important vocation in the Church, it is the mind of the bishops of the Council, expressed in this Decree, that priests, educators, and parents should foster vocations to the Religious life. The Decree also clearly states that Religious communities have the right to make themselves known in order to foster vocations and seek candidates. However, in so doing, they must observe the regulations of the Holy See and the local Ordinary.

The Decree has, it is true, remained quite general but it has made provision for more particular norms to be issued at a later date which will explain and apply these general norms. It is evident that the whole program of renewal will require careful study, planning and organization. Anything less will only result in hasty, superficial changes, changes simply for the sake of change. It will not achieve the accommodated renewal contemplated by the Council.



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