

I. Sign Value of Religious Life

A. What is the "sign value" of religious life?

"Religious life loses its meaning if it does not in a special way witness to the community of love which is the Trinity and the Church."

-Father Bianchi, S.J.

Review for Religious, 1964

We are, in the world that is often cold and hungry and alone, a "community of love" reflecting and radiating the life of the Divine Community.

B. What is the Divine Community life?

A divine way of living in which persons are fulfilled through mutual love.

Three ideas are important here:

1. Life of community does not lessen the uniqueness of the persons involved. (The most perfect Persons are the three Divine Persons - their unity fulfills them as Persons.)
2. The distinction of Persons does not detract from their life of unity. All that the Father has He gives to the Son and Father, and Father and Son give all to the Holy Spirit. The distinction is found in their relationship, not in one being superior to the others.
3. The unity of these three distinct Persons depends upon perfect communication among them. The Father is wholly given to the Son, and the Son is wholly given to the Father and this "given-ness" is the Holy Spirit. Or, in other words, the Father is "for the Son" and the Son is "for the Father", and this "for-otherness" is the Holy Spirit.

C. How does this relate to the Religious Community?

The People of God are called to participate in the community life of God. They have been called "in" and "through" Jesus Christ. The good of all creation is to form "a people" - "a community" which will be the most perfect manifestation of the "Divine Community". Religious are called to give a most unique witness to this "community-to-be". The religious community should be a catalyst in the whole people of God drawing (or, perhaps, calling) them to the final goal of love and unity most efficaciously by dedicating themselves to a life here on earth which most perfectly previews the life which is to come.

The vows and all rules and regulations must tend toward the building of this community-which-manifests-the Trinity. The social aspect of the vows must become obvious to us.

The Vow of Poverty must lead to a life of the spirit of poverty in which "things" are possessed in such a way among us that they do not divide us but unite us. And also, these "things", as far as possible, unite us with the larger community in which we live - tending toward such a use of things that no man is in want.

How do we witness poverty as a community?

The Vow of Obedience must lead to a life of the spirit of obedience in which personal ambitions and goals are examined in the light of the common good and under that person who holds authority from God (Pope - Bishop - Pastor - Religious Superiors, etc.) that again our united effort might tend to unite us so we become little by little of "one mind and one heart".

We must study deeply the concept of dialogue. Subjects must speak; superiors must listen. Superior has the final word. We seek the truth in love.

The Vow of Chastity must lead to a life of the spirit of chaste love which expresses itself in a sharing of self with all the members of the community, as far as possible, through an openness to communicate one's joys and sorrows, ideas and ideals, tending toward that tangible unity which Christ said would convert the world.

We must value friendship in religious life.

D. What is the unique contribution of the religious life to the Church?

We must give the world and the Church a visible example of the "life to come". Our vows in a special way lead us to live, as far as we can on this earth, the life that is to come.

## II. Renewal for a More Perfect Witness

The call for renewal which has come from the Vatican Council II has special relevance to the religious communities. Father Ravard mentions that when the religious communities have reformed, the whole Church has reformed, and when the religious communities have dragged their feet, the whole Church has suffered. Today is our moment in history - the Church has called for a reform and we must respond. Our great dangers are to change for the sake of change or to resist change for fear of losing our character as religious. If the "sign value" is well understood, it should be possible to change in such a way as to make ourselves more relevant in our times without losing our character as religious.

The four characteristics of every Christian community must be most evident in the religious community, and it is here that renewal must begin.

A. Community of faith

Our life cannot be explained from any human motive. We must be the Church made visible in a particular time and place and if the Church today is presenting Herself in new words, new attitudes, and new dress, we must do the same. (Rethinking rules, customs in light of new scripture and liturgical insights in the Church)

B. Community of worship

The gift of faith demands a response to God on the part of His people. The Eucharistic Celebration and the Office are the daily communal response. The Church has given Her People the Constitution on the Liturgy. Religious communities should be the first to implement the Constitution.

(Need for making the Mass the joyful celebration of the Community.  
Need for enriching ourselves with the Word of God in English version of the Divine Office)

### C. Community of love

Having accepted the gift of faith, we must respond to God in worship and to our neighbor in love. This love must manifest itself in concern and service first of all toward the members of the immediate community. Each small community must strive to become one as Jesus prayed.

(Need to reexamine our concept of silence. Need to re-think our Chapter of faults)

### D. Community of mission

Our faith also demands a response to those outside the Christian community - our response is "mission".

(Must constantly be aware of the changing needs of the Church and the world and be willing to accommodate ourselves accordingly.)

All these changes demand a living of the Paschal Mystery - death to self to live in Christ - not only as individuals but as a community. Two virtues needed today are: spiritual poverty (ready to sacrifice even my way of thinking as the truth becomes clearer through the Church's teachings) and "courageous waiting" (really patience) in the difficult period of transition. We must "stay with the community" in these transition times. (Even ten years is a short time to suffer in salvation history.)

## III Challenges

We must experiment in new works to be relevant today.

We must review our relationship with the clergy and the laity and other religious communities.

Sister Mary Esther, R.S.M. is the Assistant Dean at Saint Xavier College in Chicago. While a faculty member in the Psychology Department at the College, she was loaned to the Better World Movement for two years. She has just returned from Rocca de Papa in Rome, the International Center for the Better World Movement, and is now assuming administrative duties at Saint Xavier's.