RETURNING RELIGIOUS LIFE TO ITS BIBLICAL ROOTS

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In the years since Vatican II, especially in the West, religious and religious communities have experienced a crisis of identity. While the situation of religious in the Philippines — an emerging local Church in a country struggling for liberation, development and self-definition — is quite different from that in the developed world, we too have known the challenges of change in religious life occasioned by the historic Second Vatican Council. What is our role in this “age of the laity”? How do we preserve and renew our identity as we emerge from the cloister and find our place, more and more frequently, in the marketplaces of our cities, towns and barrios? What, in fact, is that identity? In the past, it seemed clear: we were a special class of Christians, distinctive in dress and lifestyle, who gave up “the world” in order to live a holier life than ordinary disciples of Christ. But if, as Vatican II affirms, there are no ‘ordinary’ Christians, and the world is not to be renounced but redeemed — if, as we read in chapter 5 of Lumen Gentium, the call to holiness is universal and the lay life is just as much a vocation as the religious life, — what then defines religious life in the Church today?

Fr. John M. Lozano, a Claretian professor at the Catholic Theological Union of Chicago in the United States, has written extensively on religious life in the light of Vatican II. His major work, originally published in Italian, appeared in English translation as Discipleship: Towards an Understanding of Religious Life (Chicago: CCRS, 1983). Life as Parable is intended as a more accessible re-
writing of the earlier book: “In (the) first overall study, I tried to bring the vision of the religious life back to its evangelical inspiration, and to keep constantly in mind its historical development and its richness. . . . This obliged me to do a close exegesis of biblical sources — those which have really influenced the religious life — and to refer back constantly to history. This very procedure made the book less accessible to those who did not have an adequate academic background. . . . (Thus) I thought it convenient to offer the latter a book in which the exposition would be less crowded with technical details and quotations from antiquity” (p. 1).

So Fr. Lozano promises us an answer to our questions concerning religious life today — an answer that is solidly rooted in Scripture and Tradition at the same time that it is responsive to the call of Vatican II and the signs of the times. In my judgment he has succeeded admirably in fulfilling his promise. After an introductory first chapter which surveys the ideals of religious consecration in various religions and especially in succeeding epochs of Christian Church history, Lozano tells us that the crucial need today, as mandated by Vatican II, is to return to our biblical roots: “A renewal of the theology of religious life, returning to the experience of Jesus as its determinant criterion, is indispensable for this renewal of religious life itself” (p. 17).

Chapters 2 (“Jesus, In Whom It All Began”), 3 (“The Religious Life As a Parable”) and 4 (“In the Service of the Reign of God”) are essentially an exploration of the scriptural loci which were important for the subsequent evolution of the religious life. While Lozano is concerned to provide a careful exegesis of the original meaning of the texts in question, he rightly finds it equally important to explore how these texts were understood and applied in later centuries. Exegesis is the essential beginning but not the final word in his story. Since chapter 3 gives the book its title and integrating metaphor — religious life as a parable — perhaps we could focus on his argument there. After surveying some of the traditional images for religious life in the Church (angelic life; eschatological sign; state of perfection “to be acquired”), Lozano argues that the most appropriate image for religious life today is that it is a ‘parable.’ Jesus, of course, used parables as his primary linguistic tool in proclaiming the Kingdom. And, as Lozano notes (p. 51), both the Lord Jesus and the great Old Testament prophets
used actions (and not merely words) to reveal the Father and His divine plan to men and women. Jesus’ use of a little child to exemplify true discipleship, Hosea’s marriage, Jeremiah’s bachelorhood – all are ‘parables’ for those called to the Kingdom.

Lozano’s principal insight, then, is that religious life is essentially an action-parable in this great biblical tradition. ‘This is exactly the meaning of religious life in the Church. In order to remind the whole Church of the demands that the gospel makes on us all (we must deny ourselves, take up the cross, rise above family ties . . .), the spirit of the Lord Jesus calls a minority of men and women to renounce, materially and radically, their own families. . . . and the whole search for personal power and security’ (p. 52). A parable – even an action-parable – is a linguistic act: it involves a ‘word,’ a speaker, and a hearer. To be truly meaningful, the word spoken must be true; the speaker must be sincere and credible; and the hearer must be capable of understanding the word spoken. In the case of religious life as an action-parable, the ‘word’ is clearly Jesus Christ Himself and His gospel proclamation of the Kingdom of God. In terms of my description of a linguistic act, we could say that the remainder of Lozano’s book is an attempt to explore the various dimensions of this ‘word’ (e.g., celibacy, poverty and community – since he sees obedience as essentially related to and derived from the gospel call to community). The credibility of the speaker and the capacity of the hearer (the Church, the whole People of God) are always kept in focus. And for this reason, I believe, the whole book has a coherence and unity which adds greatly to its value.

From all the foregoing, it is clear that I would recommend Life as Parable to anyone who desires to understand and/or to live religious life in the age of Vatican II. I have just two qualifying reservations. First, the chapter on poverty (chap. 8) reflects a first-world perspective and problematic quite different from ours in the Philippines. The essential ideas are good and valid, but the chapter would need ‘translation’ to our very different life-situation. Second, despite Lozano’s professed intention to write a more “accessible” version of his earlier scholarly work, the exegesis and technical analysis of the present rewriting would still be quite ‘heavy’ for, say, a novice in a religious congregation. However, it would be an excellent text for novices’ guided study of the essential nature
of religious life today. And it would be quite accessible to pro-
fessed religious and laity, provided they have a solid basic training
in scripture and theology. All in all, then, Fr. Lozano has written
a valuable guide for those of us called to live, and be, a contem-
porary parable of the Kingdom of God.