THE ROLE OF THE RELIGIOUS IN THE
PHILIPPINE CHURCH AND IN THE NATION

Comments on the Responses to the Lineamenta
for the 1994 Synod of Bishops
by the Church in the Philippines

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Credit must be given to the efficient Secretary of the Synod of Bishops, Archbishop Jan Schotte, C.I.C.M., for distributing well ahead of time, and without any restriction, the Lineamenta or outline of the topic for the 1994 Synod which will deal with the role of the Religious in our time.

In Landas of July 1993, a clear and complete overview of these Lineamenta is found.

Because of the wide circulation of the Lineamenta among the Bishops and the Religious, an excellent opportunity was given to all concerned for reflection on the text and for the possibility of formulating a balanced answer.

Responses given by our Bishops and Religious were collated and sent to Rome in September. What follows are my personal reflections and comments under these two headlines: The Situation of the Religious in the Philippines, and The Challenges for the Religious in the Philippines.

1. THE SITUATION

There is an overwhelming positive consensus of the responses to the first question as to how the Consecrated Life is perceived and evaluated today by the people. Our colonial past has left
on our people a stamp of external submissiveness which, together with our proclivity towards the supernatural which is so apparent in the many manifestations of popular religiousity, makes our people an excellent seedbed for Vocations to the Religious Life.

This was good news to vocation-starved Religious Congregations of Women in Italy. By my count, about seventy different Women Congregations — from Italy alone — have opened houses for recruitment of vocations and formation of candidates within the last ten years. Most of these are located in Manila, but also the provinces are targeted. By far the majority of all Sister Congregations with Motherhouses abroad is now of Italian origin — some of these very small and with little or none overseas exposure. Apparently, it pays to live in the vicinity of Roman Cardinals and the Roman Curia.

In principle, there is nothing wrong to share our vocations with others who have less or none. What we must safeguard however, is what I like to call the Sanctity of a Vocation.

We are not recruiting for the army, nor are we promoting a special brand of soap. All we can and should do is to facilitate the dialogue of life between the Voice who calls — “Come follow Me,” and the one who hears and heeds the Voice — “They left their nets and their father Zebedee and followed Him.”

Apart from the “Italian invasion,” there is the phenomenon of ever so many local brands of Religious Communities — mostly women — sprouting up with the consent or initiative of the local Bishop or, in many instances — as an alleged inspiration by an ex-Religious to become Mother Foundress.

There must be by my estimate at least fifty of such Communities, approved or not, in the country. Yet the actual number of the Religious — about 2,200 Priests, 10,000 Sisters, 500 Brothers — is nothing really to boast about when you realize that 85% of our population of over sixty million is Catholic and a natural source for potential vocations. Other countries, like Japan or Korea with a much less catholic percentage, have proportionately a higher number of vocations.

Whatever is your reaction to this sketchy overview of numbers, it is for sure an exciting time and season of promise for the Religious Institutes in our country.
Apparently, in contrast with this, is the apodictic answer *None* to question eleven of the Lineamenta which reads “Are there new forms of consecrated life in your nation?”

This question is open to various interpretations. The most obvious is whether there are new types of Religious Life, which are in conformity with the current criteria. The answer to this is unfortunately *No*. If understood as whether there are new Institutes or Congregations, the answer is not merely *Yes* but *too many Maybe!* Moreover, several respondents pointed out that — granted the absence of new forms of Consecrated Life in the canonical sense — there is a flowering of lay-movements, swinging between extreme charismatic and affluent groups and militant grassroots organizations. The study and reading of Sacred Scripture is their common denominator and lodestar. There appears a tendency toward fanaticism. Naturally, this must have a repercussion on the Religious Life around.

The new Religious communities — formed in our country — are certainly influenced by these active lay groups, and vice-versa.

Affected and influenced heavily by inroads made by secularism and consumerism, most of the Religious Institutes in our country have taken great strides in a corporate face-lifting.

Our respondents tick off a long list of the visible fruits of this renewed presence of our Religious. They are:

— vision and spirit of the founder clearer to members
— concern for the poor
— concern for outside community
— greater relevance
— greater respect for all members
— better foundation of liturgical life
— deeper study of the Word of God
— more meaningful religious life and liturgy
— improved relationships among religious
— redirection of the apostolate towards works of justice
— more democratic style in formation
— awareness of the world and its realities
— new sense of Mission
— integrated spirituality
As negative aspects of this face-lifting which have done harm to the Religious life, the following are listed:

— too much involvement in socio-political needs
— individualistic attitude
— disorientation/ambiguity
— abuses in the name of freedom
— imbalance between prayer and action
— secularism, permissiveness

With this in very broad outline as the situation of the Religious life in our country, we must now try to articulate the challenges which it must face and respond to.

2. THE CHALLENGES

From the above description of the reality or situation of the Religious, culled from their own responses to the Lineamenta, we may be able to see better the challenges which the Religious face “in the Church and the World” of the Philippines.

For clearer perception I single out three areas: Recruitment — Formation — Apostolate.

A. RECRUITMENT

I find it curious that the Bishop, members of the Commission on Vocations and their executive secretary are all Diocesan priests, while the most active and at times aggressive recruitment is done by the Religious, both men and women.

Recruitment, a horrible term really, must be honest and with respect to all persons concerned.

For all newly-arrived Congregations in the Philippines, there is a five-year Moratorium sanctioned by the Plenary Council of the Philippines (Decree #71) on recruiting candidates for their Institutes. Nobody or at least very few know and take this injunction to heart. It is not a question of not willing to share our vocations with the Universal Church, but of preventing a genuine Vocation Program from turning into a recruitment for domestic helpers.
While several respondents complain that "the dignity of a vocation suffers from irresponsible recruitment by new congregations from abroad who offer benefits to High School graduates," others elucidate that with so many secular enticements around, we must hold out to the young the challenge of a hard choice, "daring" for God. This is to be seen in the very life style of the Religious, witnessing to the Evangelical Counsels.

B. FORMATION

For those Religious Institutes with their Motherhouse/Generalate abroad, the content and focus of Formation are directed, or at least supervised or coordinated, from their Headquarters.

But what about our Local Religious Congregations, founded by the Bishop — often for service in his diocese — or by a Sister who exchanged her first love to become Mother Foundress.

Formation will greatly depend on the aim and scope of the Institute. Some do not give any promise of viability and may be better advised to remain a simple voluntary lay group. The others who appear built on solid rock do need outside help equivalent to that given to foreign-based Institutes by their Headquarters. The answers to the Lineamenta question 15 suggest closer inter-congregational cooperation, a more inculturated formation program, while deploring the lack of trained formators. Mention is made of emotionally weak and unstable vocations and of wrong motivation, of structures which do not promote vocational growth.

The chances are that such a situation does occur more likely in our local Congregations where often everything centers around one powerful person, the Mother Foundress, without a clear congregational charism.

C. APOSTOLATE

It is in the wide field of Apostolate where our Religious have been trail-blazers to implement the spirit and directives of the Vatican Council.

The parish has become the focus, with the poor singled out for preferential treatment. In the responses to the last five
questions of the Lineamenta the same phrases recur: partners in ministry, spirit of cooperation leading to creativity and dynamism, sharing of facilities and responsibility, lay empowerment, immersion in the life of the poor, new language for communication for Evangelization, assemblies with diocesan priests and Religious.

But points of irritation and friction are also noted, such as authoritarian leadership of the priest, difference in orientation and personalities, threat of Sisters who appear more updated and knowledgeable, over-dependence of laity on religious, influence of rich friends, and secular values.

SUMMARY

Reflecting and responding to the Lineamenta has been a very worthwhile and fruitful exercise in very many, but by far not all, Religious Communities and to a lesser extent for our Bishops. About ten of them gave their own considered answer, while other Bishops sat down with the Religious and crafted their answers together.

This, in my observation, is a typical, beautiful and encouraging example of joining hearts and hands on the Diocesan level between the Bishop and his Religious as a joint witness and complementary ministry to the people. In this I think we can stand as a model to many other countries.

Let us not dissipate this remarkable reservoir of goodwill on the part of the local Bishop and his Religious collaborators in spite of occasional misunderstandings. Neither let us leave it on its present level. The Women Religious in particular have made an astounding contribution to the pastoral care in many a diocese or parish, but they are still denied a corresponding voice in the pastoral planning. Here lies a hidden resentment.

To the extent that structures of dialogue regarding the Apostolate must constantly be updated and reviewed, so must also the Charism of each Institute be reviewed constantly in the light of the current needs of our people.

Central here remains the place of the individual Religious exposed to the allurements of consumerism and freedom — who is challenged each day to deepen her/his own covenant of love,
forging it through joys and pain into a commitment of life.

Lastly, in contrast with the pervading feeling in several Western Churches where darkness has settled over many Religious Institutes (cf. question #17), we are a resilient people with strong signs of vitality both in our long established, and also in our new local Filipino, Religious Institutes.

We are a people of hope, improvising from the little we may have to evoke in one another our common responsibility to grow steadily as a new people pleasing to God and an asset to our nation.