



SPIRITUAL LIFE AND MISSION IN NEW FORMS OF CONSECRATED LIFE

Giancarlo Rocca, ssp¹

I.

NOTES FOR A HISTORY OF NEW COMMUNITIES

1. *Birth*

It is well known that a certain number of new communities arose before the Second Vatican Council, but the greater number appeared afterward and continue to flourish today. This is how the opinion circulated that the new communities were a result of the Second Vatican Council, which had opened the doors to the renewal of religious life.

This opinion, however, needs to be qualified. That is, we must ask if we are witnessing a renewal of religious life, or instead, the birth of a new kind of religious life, somewhat similar to what happened in the case of the mendicant Orders during the Middle Ages, the Orders of Clerics Regular around the time of the Council of Trent, religious congregations after the French Revolution, and secular institutes after the Second World War.

2. *Number*

Thanks to the first census of new communities, published in 2010, it was possible to identify with some certainty 775 new communities, and in the same volume, more than 50 others, that were not, however, supported by as much information as one would have liked.

According to this census, the foundation of new communities continued to grow after 1960 and reached its apex between 1980 and 1990, with as many as 222 foundations. The nations with the greatest number of new communities are the USA (205 institutes), Italy (200), France (161), Canada (47), and Brazil (44).

Considering sex, there are new exclusively masculine communities (186), exclusively feminine (226), and integrated, that is, composed of consecrated men and women (363), which constitute the majority.

¹ **Giancarlo Rocca**, sacerdote paolino, è direttore del *Dizionario degli istituti di perfezione*. Ha insegnato *Storia delle istituzioni di vita consacrata*: nella Pontificia Università Gregoriana, Facoltà di Storia della Chiesa; nella Pontificia Università Lateranense/Claretianum; nella Pontificia Facoltà di Scienze dell'Educazione "Auxilium".

Regarding the number of members, understood in the broad sense, that is, not only consecrated members: a good 380 new communities have fewer than 50; 140 number between 50 and 500; 19 between 500 and 1,000; 11 between 1,000 and 2,000; and only 10 exceed 2,000 members. Overall, the number of members of new communities seems small in proportion to the high number of communities.

Information is also available about those new communities that went out of existence. According to the census, a total of 91 foundations no longer exist; of these, 79 dissolved for internal reasons (lack of new members, uncertain internal direction, etc.), while 12 others were suppressed by order of the ecclesiastical authority.

To this first census was added a second, published in 2015, which listed 77 new communities, a good number of which were founded in Brazil and were linked to the Catholic Charismatic Renewal, illustrating the high priority that new foundations give to spirituality.

3. Typology

Considering the variety of new communities, the authors acknowledge various typologies. Two are most widely accepted.

a) *The first typology* distinguishes three kinds of institutes:

- communities most resembling monastic religious life, traditionally understood, and therefore, possessing strong cenobitic and contemplative-eremetical characteristics; together they number about 400 institutes;
- communities of service, either charitable or apostolic, which together number around 370 institutes;
- communities with their roots in the Catholic Charismatic Renewal; together they number more than 100 institutes.

b) *The second typology* also distinguishes three kinds of new communities:

- new institutes of consecrated life, which fall into the traditional typology of institutes of consecrated life, and are waiting for recognition either as religious or secular institutes, or as societies of common life, and so are not really new communities, but institutes with a traditional character which were founded after the Second Vatican Council;
- new integrated communities, that is, composed of consecrated men and women, who live together, pray together, and carry out their apostolate together, and so, have as their basis the actual cohabitation of consecrated men and women.
- new multi-vocational communities, which implies the presence of consecrated men and women, priests, and families with children; these last, however, are not considered members of the community in which their parents participate, although in a different way.

4. Principal characteristics

In general, the main characteristics of the new communities can be summarized thus: recognition of the value of sharing and of fraternal life; great esteem for hospitality; strong emphasis on the centrality of the Gospel; new forms of prayer, not infrequently along the lines of the Charismatic Renewal; strong propensity for forms of contemplative-eremetical life, with a notable appreciation for silence; appreciation for the religious habit, regarded not only as a juridical element, but as an identifying spiritual value; traditional devotional practices, understood as “a step backward for a step forward.”

Regarding the institute's character, the principal features are the following:

a) *Birthplace*. The new communities are clearly a novelty of the West, the part of the world that has lived through the crisis in consecrated life, which has affected even in its most recent forms – the religious congregation and the secular institute. It appears that a change is underway in the structures of religious life; again the West is involved, as it was after the French Revolution, with the establishment of the religious congregation, first in Europe, then on other continents.

b) *Work carried out*. The new institutions dedicated to an apostolic service no longer entrust their work only to consecrated men and women, but call for the widest possible ministry with the involvement of everyone, married and unmarried, consecrated and non-consecrated, in the conviction that everyone – in a complementarity of roles – must bring his or her contribution to the works of the Church.

c) *Gender integration into mixed masculine and feminine communities within a single institute*. This is a characteristic of various communities, not only in the development of their apostolate, but also in their shared common life of prayer and daily activity.

d) *Temporal nature of the vows*. Some new communities consider the commitment of their members to be voluntary, decided at the private, personal level, with vows renewable year after year or for an undetermined time.

e) *Ecumenism*. Various communities accept adherents of other Christian confessions as members, or maintain close ties with other confessions. While many new communities preserve their Catholic character, in others this point appears to be fading.

f) *Authority*. In various communities this poses no problem, and they place their members on an equal footing, not distinguishing among priests and consecrated laity. Consequently, they accept a lay person and even a woman as an authority figure in the community.

g) *Inclusion of married couples*. This is a common reality in several new communities, at times without a special emphasis on celibacy, in the conviction that the Gospel is the common basis for everyone. Married people are considered as members of the community, with rules that are adapted for them, but which usually do not oblige their children.

5. The Congregation's procedure in relation to institutes of consecrated life and societies of apostolic life

In general, it can be said that the Congregation has moved from the favorable attitude it expressed in 1990 in its *Criteria* for the approval of new communities, to the more restricted one it adopted in 2005 during the Plenary Meeting of Cardinals.

a) *The criteria, established in 1990, for the approval of new forms of consecrated life, in keeping with canon 605 of the Code of Canon Law*.

According to these criteria, published more than once (the first was in 1992), the Congregation for the Institutes of Consecrated Life had:

- accepted the possibility of approving a gender integrated institute of men and women governed by a single corpus of rules;
- left to individual institutes the task of establishing norms to regulate their daily life with respect to their apostolate and the specific demands of their members' life;
- allowed gender integrated institutes to be governed by a woman;
- resolved the problem of the jurisdiction of priests, with the requirement that, if an institute was led by a woman, the vicar general would be a priest, on whom the priests would depend for their ministry;

- not dealt with the questions of the temporary nature of vows and the presence of non-Catholics in new institutes, leaving these to the experience and responsibility of local Ordinaries.

In practice, the Congregation for the Institutes of Consecrated Life had really created the model and the terminology of the “ecclesial Family of consecrated life.” In this way, it was possible to configure a single institute, composed of consecrated men, lay and clerical (who thereby became incardinated in the institute), and of consecrated women, as well as of laity, single and married. Rules were adapted to them, which fixed rights and duties within the Family, at the head of which there was a President, who enjoyed authority over the whole Family.

b) *The Plenary Meeting of the Congregation for the Institutes of Consecrated Life, celebrated in 2005.*

The criteria adopted in 1992 were tightened by the plenary meeting of 2005, which, after encouraging all those that aspire to a life of sanctity, decided to establish some limits to the approval of new communities.

- The plenary meeting decided to exclude from approval all the various institutions that accept for membership those bound by marriage ties. Under this aspect the plenary meeting reaffirmed what article 62 of *Vita consecrata* declared in 1996, namely, that while it praised the commitment of the partners, it rejected the possibility of membership in an institute of consecrated life which has celibacy as a foundation.
- The plenary meeting decided not to approve those integrated institutes that were intended for the actual cohabitation of consecrated men and women.
- The plenary meeting decided to exclude from approval all those institutes founded on temporary forms of consecration, that is, temporary vows renewable year after year or for longer periods, but always of a temporary nature.

The plenary meeting of 2005 was well aware that it restricted the procedure adopted in the *Criteria* of 1990; it would certainly be interesting to know the reasons for this decision.

In practice, the following can be regarded as the effects of these decisions:

- a certain hesitation to approve new institutes, clearly evidenced in the fewer than a dozen approved so far;
- the fear within some institutes, which had obtained diocesan approval as gender integrated institutes with actual cohabitation of life, that their rules would be changed in the event they asked for pontifical approval;
- the fear that new gender integrated institutes would request simple diocesan approval, for fear of being deprived of an element that they believe is part of their charism.

II.

ELEMENTS OF SPIRITUALITY IN THE NEW COMMUNITIES

Some elements have already been noted and point to a strong emphasis on common life in their various forms, without the more traditional distinctions between men’s and women’s activities (kitchen and domestic service for women, etc.): the spiritual value attached to the religious habit, not only as a sign identifying a person’s membership in an institute, but as a sign of consecration; a certain emphasis on practices, once common in traditional institutes and then abandoned (Eucharistic, and even nocturnal, adoration; perpetual Rosary, etc.) and so on.

A more general characteristic in new communities is the presence of diverse spiritual traditions: Augustinian, Basilian, Benedictine, Carmelite, Franciscan, Ignatian (such as the Exercises of St.

Ignatius, etc.), and even more. According to the numbers, first place is held by communities linked to the Charismatic Renewal (110), followed by those with a Franciscan bent (82), Benedictine (73), Carmelite (53), and others. Not to be ignored are those with a traditionalist orientation (19), tied to the Pontifical Commission *Ecclesia Dei*.

Reference to those with traditional spiritual ties is found in the volume *La svolta dell'innovazione* (see the bibliography). It indicates which of them come from the Franciscan world and which from the Jesuit, which is also significant because not a few founders of new communities come from these Orders.

The ways in which new communities interweave their spirituality with Marian devotion and with the Charismatic Renewal were examined in a special way.

Regarding Marian devotion: At the beginning, specifically around 1960, there emerged in France, where this phenomenon was studied, several “base communities,” from which Marian devotion was almost absent and even challenged, since it implied an excessively masculine view of religion. That is, the general view saw in the Marian dogmas an image of the woman based on the vision of St. Paul, for whom “the man is head of the woman” (1Cor 11:3). At the time, it was practically impossible to find a new community with a reference to Mary in its name. Later, new communities that were better inserted in the ecclesial context appeared with Marian names: The Monastic Family [monks and nuns] of Bethlehem and of the Assumption of the Virgin; Little Brothers and Little Sisters of Mary, Mother of the Redeemer; Mother of God, Rejoice; Radiant Morning Star; Mother of Mercy, etc.

Besides the titles, practices of Marian devotion developed: the practice of reciting even the whole Rosary returned to various communities; numerous Marian songs were prepared; Marian medals returned to use. In more than one case, these practices were linked to the apparitions at Medjugorje; the Marian teaching of St. Louis Grignon de Montfort was taken up again.

Generally speaking, what is said of France can be said to some degree of all nations.

Regarding ties with the Catholic Charismatic Renewal (also known as Baptism in the Spirit), to which many communities are connected, especially those that arose in Brazil, we recall the convention organized in 2013 by the French community *Chemin Neuf*. Baptism in the Spirit, or the Outpouring of the Spirit, is at the root of *Chemin Neuf's* founding, and the Jesuit, Fr. Laurent Fabre publicly recognizes how the experience was not only decisive for the foundation of his new community, but could also revitalize the Church's parish life.

New communities, too, obviously feel the need to unite spiritual life and mission, and use particular means to unify the life of their members. Following are some examples.

For the *Chemin Neuf* community, Tuesday is a so-called “desert day,” in which the members are invited to reduce their commitments to a minimum, so as to remain in community in solitude, prayer, and asceticism.

For the *Franciscan Fraternity of Bethany*, the key practice – which if the community abandoned it, the founder used to say, the community would disappear – is the nocturnal prayer which the members, consecrated men and women together, must make from 3:00 to 4:00 every morning. Exceptions are allowed, due to particular circumstances of health, travel, or work, but most of the members are to fulfill this commitment.

For the community of *Idente Missionaries*, it appears that their central characteristic can be defined as “common spiritual direction.” Obviously, lauding the practice of individual spiritual direction carried out for centuries in religious life and in the Church, the *Idente Missionaries* believe that they need to take a further step; they are supported in this view by their founder, who had encouraged it. It involves the practice of conducting the chapter of faults together, fraternal correction, etc., for which, however, there are no precise instructions.

ESSENTIAL BIBLIOGRAPHY

I. *On the history of new communities*

- Roberto Fusco - Giancarlo Rocca, edd., *Nuove forme di vita consacrata*, Città del Vaticano, Urbaniana University Press, 2010;
- Giancarlo Rocca, ed., *Primo censimento delle nuove comunità*, Città del Vaticano, Urbaniana University Press, 2010;
- Roberto Fusco - Giancarlo Rocca - Stefano Vita, edd., *La svolta dell'innovazione. Le nuove forme di vita consacrata*, Città del Vaticano, Urbaniana University Press, 2015.

II. *On the spirituality of new communities*

- *Marian spirituality*: Bernard Peyrous, *La vierge Marie et les communautés nouvelles*, in: AA. VV., *La Vierge Marie dans l'enseignement de la théologie et la catéchèse mariale adulte (Études mariales)*, Paris, Médiaspaul, 2002, p. 86-101.
- *Catholic Charismatic Renewal*: the Acts of the gathering organized in 2013 by the community of *Chemin Neuf* were published in a special issue of *Istina* 59 (2014), under the title: *Du coeur de l'homme au corps de l'Eglise: le Baptême dans l'Esprit Saint*.