

January 2008: Community, Health and Consecrated Living

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Personal Reflections: Tuesday, January 27, 2008

If you remember the last NewesLetter, I presented [five essential ingredients for intentional communities](#). These are the most important ingredients for a collection of individuals to become a thriving, healthy community. And if you remember even further back, all of this discussion about community was introduced by a conviction: that *modern society has produced many collectives, but few real communities, many individuals, but few real solitaries*.

I suggested in our last NewesLetter that the factors that most centrally facilitate healthy community life are (1) geographic proximity, (2) common values and practices, (3) common decision-making, (4) common prayer, and (5) love. When we live close enough to share life, when we mutually (and even formally) agree on basic values and share practices that embody those values, when we make decisions about our lives together and agree on how those decisions are to be made, when we pray together regularly, and when we love each other in the midst of our differences (patient, kind, not jealous or rude . . .) we are more likely to experience quality community life, a life that perseveres through good and bad.

In this NewesLetter, I would like to make a further suggestion. It is this: *we may have much to learn in a post-modern society from the history of consecrated living*.

First, what do I mean by “consecrated living”? Think for a moment. Have you ever consecrated yourself to God? A “consecration” has an element of formal and serious commitment. It describes something within the person who lives this life. But it also is a commitment *to* something. It has a sacrificial feel at times (consecrating something on an altar). And yet as consecrated *living* it describes a quality of ongoing existence. People who have made formal and serious commitments to one another and who live within the context of mutually agreed-upon principles of daily life are, to my mind, involved in “consecrated living.” If you want the fine print, read the two paragraphs below.

I am struggling for the right language. The formal term in Roman Catholic circles is “religious life.” The term “religious” not only refers more generally to people who pursue the things of God, it also has a more technical meaning. In the Roman Catholic tradition, and among students of Christian spirituality, “religious” designates persons or communities who have consecrated themselves to God in a special way, usually by taking some kind of “vows” and living under a formal statement of the general principles of daily life (often called a Rule or Constitutions). But “religious” carries lots of odd connotations these days. Others have suggested “intentional living,” but I think that most anybody can live an intentional life. Likewise some groups today call themselves Orders, and in their context it is an appropriate term, but do I want to use the term “ordered living” to refer to the whole? It doesn’t communicate the notion of a special commitment. There is a lot of discussion around the phrase “new monasticism” and perhaps this word will ultimately stay, but historically “monasticism” only refers to a piece of the whole, the enclosed life, and that does not resemble the monasticism I see developing now. So for now I use “consecrated living.” If you have any ideas, feel free to write me.

There are a number of groups of “consecrated,” communities who have lived under a rule and in the context of formal vows. In the Roman Catholic tradition these groups are most generally identified as “religious institutes,” which are divided into “Orders” and “Congregations” depending on their relationship to the larger Church. And these are further divided into “monastic” communities — those orders or congregations which live a more withdrawn or enclosed life (like the Benedictines), and “apostolic” communities — those which emphasize the life of outreach (like the Franciscans). In the Eastern Orthodox tradition, there is essentially one single Order of nuns and monks manifest in different regions by various communal and solitary expressions. And if we wanted to look in the Protestant tradition, we could also find a number of religious communities who live together in the context of some kind of common “covenant” or “resolutions” (like the Amish). There are also communities which have a more informal consecrated life (like the Brothers and Sisters of the Common Life or the Beguinages of Late Medieval Europe).

There are a bunch of people in the history of the Christian Church who have lived a similar kind of life (under formal principles, in the context of a serious commitment) and for now I identify this kind of life with the term “consecrated living.” And again, I think we might have much to learn from the history of consecrated living.

Just think about it. Where do we find, in the history of the Church, groups of like-minded people who live in geographic proximity? We look to monasteries, to Amish communities, to mission centers. What groups specify their common values and live these values out in a set of common practices, addressing, when needed, even the details of their daily lives? While we could point to a number of groups, this ingredient is especially present in the history of consecrated communities. The function of a Rule of Life is to specify common values and how they will be lived out by a given community. The covenant is not just about how the “ministry” will be conducted, as would be the case in any number of religious organizations. Rather we are talking about a common agreement about how a community *lives* day-to-day life.

Similarly, while common decision-making habits are specified in any number of religious organizations (Boards of Directors and Roberts Rules of Order often serve these functions) it is less common to see mutually accepted forms of decision-making practiced by communities of people regarding their form of life. (how might you feel about allowing a group of people have a say in what you ate, how you dressed, when you prayed and what your career might look like?) And yet it is normal for consecrated communities to consider and reconsider each of these matters.

As I mentioned in the last NewsLetter, the Divine Office of prayer offered at specific times throughout the day has been a characteristic of religious institutes both East and West. While regular, common, daily prayer has been practiced in both parish congregations and in homes throughout Christian history it has been the monasteries that have preserved and developed this practice the most.

And then there is love. It would be impossible to prove that love is more present in consecrated communities than elsewhere. Furthermore, my suspicion is that in previous centuries, membership in consecrated communities was idealized such that consecrated folk are over represented in our lists of the heroes of the faith (the “saints”). There are probably a number of models of Christian love who have never made a special consecration of life (outside a commitment to marriage and family, perhaps). And yet there are a number of stories about the fruit of love issuing forth from a consecrated life.

Most significantly, where do we find *all* of these ingredients intentionally blended *together* at the very foundations of a community? While we can see a little of this and that here and there, when we look at the history of the consecrated life we see these ingredients front and center, repeatedly, throughout the entire history of the Church.

It is interesting to think that from the fifth through the fifteenth centuries, consecrated life played a significant role in the preservation, development, and spread of Christianity. The monasteries preserved Christian documents during the “Dark Ages.” Advances in theology, in devotion, and in community life were pioneered by religious orders. The Christian faith was advanced significantly, as mentioned above, by various consecrated communities. Key theologians and leaders of the Church were members of religious orders. One could even argue that, when Christianity was at its best, it was *led*, in the premodern era, by those living a consecrated life.

In the modern period, from the sixteenth through the twenty-first centuries, the consecrated life has played less of a role. The foundation of the Jesuits and the development of a wide range of apostolic congregations led to an expansion of compassionate and missionary activity often tied to a consecrated life of some form. But in both the Roman and the Orthodox traditions, modern religious life was often sequestered off into the idealized fringe of the Church. And in the Protestant tradition, there was, in the formal sense, no religious life to be found. Outside of a few Anglican, Lutheran, Anabaptist and ecumenical communities, there has been no voice of the consecrated life from the Protestant tradition.

Until just recently. Here we are, at the onset of a “post-modern” era, and here we are exploring “new monasticism.” Mission groups are born who call themselves “orders.” Isn’t it fascinating that just as we are shifting from an age of individualism to a new interest in community, we are beginning to look for wisdom to the history of the consecrated life? *Modern society has produced many collectives, but few real communities, many individuals, but few real solitaries.* I have a suspicion that there is much for us to learn from our foreparents in the consecrated life. But enough for now.

May God the Father bless you with his riches in Christ Jesus through the work of the Holy Spirit.

Evan B. Howard