

Why an Ecumenical Theology of Consecrated Life for the 21st Century?

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[This paper is an incomplete draft of what I thought at the time would be the first chapter of the first volume of a three-volume “ecumenical theology of consecrated life.” It looks currently (5/3/24) as if this project will become a single volume and I don’t know where this material will fit. Nevertheless, it gives a worthy account of my sense of the “state of things” going forward. At least this far into it.]

Some of us just want more. Indeed, I think God *invites* some of us into “more,” perhaps even requiring a different way of life. That longing, that invitation, does not make some Christians more acceptable to God. Any and every human being possesses both the calling and the capacity for the fullness of Christian love. Nonetheless, some have felt compelled to “leave all and follow” Jesus since the moment he called his first disciples.¹ Some of us today feel compelled to leave all—or at least to leave a great deal—and follow.² Such is the impulse toward consecrated or “religious” life, whether embodied in the act of joining an Anabaptist community, a Roman Catholic religious order, an Egyptian hermitage, or helping start a new intentional Christian community.³ I have known individuals who entered each of these, describing their journey as one of responding to the call for “more” through a process of leaving and following.

But what of a *theology* of consecrated (or “religious”) life? Sandra Schneiders, scholar in biblical studies and Christian spirituality and a sister within the Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, offers a worthy initial definition of such a theology when she states that it would involve “the elaboration of a theoretical framework within which all the elements of religious life can be explained

1 Basic histories of monasticism(s) and forms of consecrated life.

2 Treatment of the range of expressions today.

3 I will sort out the language of “religious life,” “consecrated life,” “intentionality” and so on later in this chapter. For the present it is enough to know that I will use the language of my sources when I am discussing their thought and I will use “consecrated life” (for the most part) when speaking in my own voice.

and situated in relationship to each other and to the whole.”⁴ Schneiders wrote this definition at the introduction to a collection of talks and essays presented in the decade after the second Vatican Council of the Roman Catholic Church closed in 1965. Her conviction was that the time had come for a re-conceptualization of religious life. After Vatican II, she proclaimed, “Nothing less than a full-scale re-examination and rethinking of religious life was called for.”⁵ In the nearly thirty years following, Schneiders penned three full volumes exploring the nature of religious life in the new millennium.⁶ Schneiders represents only one of a variety of voices calling for and contributing to a rethinking of religious life.

Yet the need is not merely for theologies of consecrated life, but further for *ecumenical* theologies of consecrated life. As I shall show below, Protestants, Anglicans, Anabaptists, Orthodox and others have been exploring and thinking about consecrated life in their own somewhat disconnected ways.⁷ The fact of the matter is, Roman Catholic canon law is insufficient to provide, to use Schneider’s own words, a “framework within which all the elements of religious life can be situated in relationship to each other and to the whole.” The situation now requires the development of provisional integrative ecumenical syntheses that can help all of us imagine and explore consecrated Christian life today. Consequently, my aim in this volume and in the two to follow is to provide a “first look” at this topic—Christian consecrated life explored historically, theologically, and practically—in hopes that these reflections can stimulate further conversation and exploration.

In this first volume I will address method and history. As there are few models of an ecumenical theology of consecrated Christian life,⁸ it will be necessary to articulate as clearly as possible the whys

4 Sandra M. Schneiders, *New Wineskins: Reimagining Religious Life Today* (New York: Paulist Press, 1986), 1.

5 Schneiders, *New Wineskins*, 27.

6 Volumes. See also her *Prophets in Their Own Country: Women Religious Bearing Witness to the Gospel in a Troubled Church* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011).

7 I find it best not to divide Christianity between “Catholic,” “Protestant,” and “Orthodox.” Anabaptist communities were persecuted by both Protestants and Catholics. Anglicans saw themselves as in between Protestants and Catholics. No terminology is truly precise. Here I will refer to Western-origin Christians that are not associated with the Roman Catholic Church as “non-Catholic” Christians.

8 Actually, as of the publication of this book I am aware of no study written by a Protestant that compares with the kind of project I am exploring in these volumes.

and hows of this project. Then, having clarified method, I will proceed—in the remainder of the first volume—to reflect on moments and themes in Christian history with the goal of introducing the central questions surrounding a theology of consecrated life. Once these big questions are contextually understood I will be able, in the second volume, to join biblical, theological, sociological and other wisdoms into a re-examination of the questions in an effort to constructively express a framework capable of making sense of contemporary consecrated life. This, in turn, will put us in a place where I can collect a few ideas together in the final volume regarding how a consecrated life could be lived in practice.⁹

The Call(s) to (Re)Imagine Consecrated Life: 1960 to the present

Why an ecumenical theology of consecrated life? I write these volumes in response to what I perceive as “calls”: calls to reimagine—to theologize—consecrated life. There is the call I have experienced personally for many years as a non-Roman Catholic Christian.¹⁰ But I think I am not alone. When I listen to conversations from various corners, I hear other calls to re-imagine consecrated life. Whether consciously expressed or not, people are longing for a theology of religious life, for someone(s) to construct integrative syntheses—*theologies*, if you will—of what a life consciously ordered in light of a commitment to something more might be all about. In fact, if I hear correctly, I can identify a number of such calls toward re-imagination: calls from Rome, calls from Christianity outside of Roman Catholic institutes, and calls from the world itself. At times these calls are explicit. At other times they are vaguely perceived. Calls from some circles are perhaps not best described as calls to *re-imagine*, since, for example, monasteries were eliminated from Protestant and Anglican countries for centuries. Calls from those circles are perhaps better described as invitations to imagine for a first time: hence my use of *(Re)imagine*.

9 Contributions to practice along the way . . .

10 I will need to write my own story somewhere and footnote here.

As I have reviewed the state of affairs in Christianity, I perceive these calls to have reached a significant nexus, particularly as one attends to the voices of those exploring consecrated life between 1960 and the present. On the one hand, we find examples during this period of calls from many circles to rethink the practice (even the idea) of consecrated life. By studying these examples we learn how expressions of the need and reasons for consecrated life (the “why”) have developed within the past half century or so. Yet the literature of this period often also addresses the kinds of reflection that are likely to prove most helpful (the “how”). Thus my treatment of the call(s) between 1960 and the present will also contribute to my presentation of the method of theological reflection that will guide this project. I can only sketch the broad and illustrative contours of this period.

Calls from Rome

The documents of the second Vatican Council of the Roman Catholic Church, along with statements issued in the years that followed, issued an explicit and official call for groups of nuns, monks, friars, sisters, and so on (later identified as “Institutes of Consecrated Life” and “Societies of Apostolic Life”) to reexamine their ways of life, rewriting their own constitutions in light of the fresh vision and mandates communicated by the council.¹¹ This official call was not, however, the first call to appear in Roman Catholic circles. Systems of comprehending and managing Catholic religious life—systems which were put in place at the Council of Trent (1545–63), rooted in the theological framework of Thomas of Aquinas (1225–74), codified in the 1917 Code of Canon Law, and promulgated through manuals such as the *Catechism of the Vows*¹²—were found wanting even prior to the Vatican council. The Roman call to re-imagine, and indeed the re-imagining itself, was foreshadowed in the mid-twentieth century by a variety of forces. European monks, like those of the community of Solesmes in France, explored liturgical roots through a fresh recovery of early forms of

11 Document this.

12 Document each of these.

chant.¹³ Monastic historians such as Jean Leclercq looked behind Aquinas to earlier sources for the meaning of monasticism.¹⁴ Spiritual writers like Thomas Merton emphasized the inner and spiritual over the external and juridical.¹⁵ Some Roman Catholic theologians argued for the universal call of all believers to holiness while others reexamined Aquinas and pointed the Roman Church toward a new way of looking at traditional beliefs.¹⁶ Of particular note is the Sister Formation movement, which in their journey toward a more appropriate life employed theological trends and experimented with novel practices, ultimately expressing what one writer describes as “a changed perspective on the vows: an emphasis on personalism, Scripture, the imitation of Christ, the vow as a public witness which speaks to a social reality.”¹⁷ Another historian comments, “It would be no exaggeration to say that the [Sister Formation] Conference was the most influential factor in preparing for and initiating change within religious congregations in the 1950s and 1960s.”¹⁸ Nearly all of these individuals and groups were also reconsidering the theology of “the world” for religious life. From different quarters, religious were beginning to imagine their identity less in terms of an ecclesial institution and more as a spiritual movement.

After three years of preparation Pope John XXIII opened the Second Vatican Council on October 11, 1962. The council met in four sessions that year and in the fall of the subsequent three years, closed by Pope Paul VI on December 8, 1965. It is fair to say that the Second Vatican Council initiated changes in the Roman church unparalleled since the Council of Trent.¹⁹ Most significantly for

13 document

14 Bouyer, . . . , also Merton’s early lectures, “Monk in the Diaspora” . . . [check Sandra’s bibliography on this](#)

15 Document this

16 Document manual theology, transcendental Thomism, etc. (Chenu, Rahner . . .)

17 Angelyn Dries, “Living in Ambiguity: A Paradigm Shift Experienced by the Sister Formation Movement,” in *The Catholic Historical Review* 79/3 (July, 1993) 485 (478–87).

18 Mary Schneider, “American Sisters and the Roots of Change: The 1950s,” in *U.S. Catholic Historian* 7/1 (Winter, 1988) 64 (55–72).

19 By the way, it is easy—yet unfair—in a post-Vatican II environment simply to interpret Trent as the nemesis of God’s work. For example, one brief history of monasticism declares, correctly I think, “As Western monasticism became a quickly sinking ship, a beacon of light eventually emerged when the Catholic Church responded with the Council of Trent (1545-1563) and its own Reformation. Strong decrees of reform, centralization, and revitalization helped not only to save monasticism from obliteration, but to provide it with new energy, vitality, and direction.” (see *History of Monasticism*.” available at <https://www.monasteries.com/en-GB/history-of-monasticism/>. Accessed December 29, 2020).

those who had taken vows (or were considering taking vows), the Council declared that (1) religious profession did not secure a special call or anointing to holiness—God’s call to holiness was universal; and (2) that Christians were to see themselves less as “against” the world and more in terms of living a distinctly Christian life brought up to date with relationship to the world (summarized by the term *aggiornamento* – “updating”).²⁰ These two shifts profoundly altered the self-image of Roman Catholic religious.

But there was more. In the document *Perfectae caritatis*, the council specifically identified two central elements in the renewal of religious life.²¹ First, the it expressed the need of a constant return to the sources of the Christian life and the original spirit of the foundation of the group. Second, was a similar expression of the need for an adaptation of their traditions for the changed conditions of our time. A look backward and a look forward. All aspects of religious life were to be reviewed. For example, the document urges that “according to these same criteria let the manner of governing the institutes also be examined.”²² Needless to say, the “manner of governing” a religious order is a big deal. Thus the decree mandated that “let constitutions, directories, custom books, books of prayers and ceremonies and such like be suitably re-edited and, obsolete laws being suppressed, be adapted to the decrees of this sacred synod.”²³ An explicit call to re-imagine religious life had been issued, directly from the top.

At the same time, there were important matters related to a theological understanding of religious life that remained unchanged in the documents of Vatican II. Religious life continued to be identified with the “evangelical counsels” of the vows to poverty, chastity, and obedience, even though biblical and historical scholarship had begun to question the foundational character of these vows, particularly as interpreted since Trent. A traditional understanding of religious obedience appeared to be

20 LG, GS, PC . . . editions, reference choices and so on.

21 See PC 2.

22 PC 3

23 Ibid.

maintained. Contexts of global poverty were not acknowledged.²⁴ How then were institutes of religious life to re-imagine—much less reconfigure—their way of life in light of a fresh examination of their fundamental sources and contemporary contexts?

Things began to happen almost immediately: from below and from above. People followed the call to *aggiornamento* with a passion, and religious orders started making changes. Historian and monastic statesman Jean Leclercq wrote in May of 1965 to Thomas Merton about his own visits to African monasteries: “In fact, monastic usages, observances are adapted, even in the Trappist monasteries. Everywhere there is the vernacular, which the General Chapter has now allowed for your Order in African and other foundations.”²⁵ At the same time, statements were issued from the papacy and other official sources that, while affirming some aspects of the Council and contemporary concerns, seemed in other ways to backpedal towards a traditional understanding of religious life.²⁶ Some grew skeptical. Thomas Merton, for example, responded in his journal (Dec 24, 1967) to an “appalling article” he read. He writes, “All this is based on Vatican II, which makes me wonder what is so new about *Perfectae caritatis*. The whole thing is sickening.”²⁷ Some, such as emerging theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether, considered the elimination of religious life—or at least *monastic* expressions of religious life—entirely.²⁸ By the time the final revisions of canon law had been published (1983) and institutions had begun to work things out in their own constitutions, a virtual

24 See for example, Murphey-O’Connor, *What is Religious Life?*, 4–5; Schneiders, *New Wineskins*, 23–28, 139; Cussianovich, *Religious Life and the Poor*, 15–16. See also Leclercq, *Aspects of Monasticism*, 99–133; Lozano, *Discipleship*, 65–72.

25 Hart, ed., *Survival or Prophecy*, 96.

26 For the documents themselves, see “Evangelica Testificatio: On the Renewal of the Religious Life According to the Teaching of the Second Vatican Council” (1967)

(https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_p-vi_exh_19710629_evangelica-testificatio.html); “The Contemplative Dimension of Religious Life” (1969)

(https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccsrlife/documents/rc_con_ccsrlife_doc_12081980_the-contemplative-dimension-of-religious-life_en.html); Pontifical Commission for the Revision of the Code of Canon Law, *Schema of Canons on Institutes of Life Consecrated by Professions of the Evangelical Counsels* (Draft) (United States Catholic Conference: Washington, D.C., 1977). **Essential Elements**. For early responses see for example, Gelpi,

Functional Asceticism; Tillard, *Devant Dieu*; Cussianovich, *Religious Life and the Poor*; *LCWR Recommendations: Schema of Canons on Religious Life* (‘77); R. A. Hill, “Canon Law after Vatican II: Renewal or Retreat?” *America* 137 (Nov 5, 1977), 298–300; and Lawrence Cada, et al., *Shaping the Coming of Religious Life*.

27 Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain*, 30.

28 See Ruether, *The Church Against Itself* and more specifically with regard to religious life her correspondence with Thomas Merton in Tardiff, ed. *At Home in the World*.

flood of theological reflection on religious life had emerged.²⁹ From my reading of this literature I have been able to identify four themes—themes present in expressions from all forms of religious life—that together express what I am calling a “call from Rome” for a re-imagination of consecrated life (or perhaps by 1989 it is not only a call *from* Rome, but also a call *to* Rome).

The first theme is that religious life (perhaps along with the church and the world more generally) is in a state of “crisis.” This term appears everywhere. American Jesuit theologian Donald Gelpi declares in 1966, that “things are building up to what could be a serious crisis. Vatican II indeed opened many Church windows that were for a long time sealed, and the winds have swept away many things that we had long thought were beyond question immovable. The coming generation of young religious has lots of questions to ask its predecessors. But they will not be content with catechism responses or snippets of some rule or custom book.”³⁰ The back cover of French Dominican theologian J. M. R. Tillard’s (1974, a collection of previously published material) *Devant Dieu et Pour Le Monde: Le projet des religieux* [Before God and for the World: The Project of Religious] pronounces, “Les Instituts religieux sont en crise” [Religious institutes are in crisis].³¹ Peruvian Salesian scholar Alejandro Cussianovich devotes a section of his *Religious Life and the Poor* to a “comparative study of the various descriptions of the so-called “crisis” in the religious life and of the factors that account for its development.”³² German theologian Johannes Metz in 1977 suggests that, “If I am right, the crisis of religious life is only secondarily a crisis of vocations. In my view it is primarily a *crisis of function*, caused by the absence of major specific tasks in the Church, tasks that to a certain extent cannot be handed over to others.”³³

29 In addition to the works cited above, see Rahner, *Religious Life Today*; Boff, *God’s Witnesses*, Metz, *Followers of Christ*; Moloney, *Disciples and Prophets*; Daniel Rees, et al. *Consider Your Call*; Clarence Gallagher, “The Church and Institutes of Consecrated Life,” in *The Way Supplement* 50 (Summer, 1984): 3–15; Howard J. Gray, “Shift in Theology,” in *The Way Supplement* 65 (Summer 1989): 54–65; O’Murchu, *Religious Life: A Prophetic Vision*.

30 Gelpi, *Functional*, 29

31 Tillard, back cover. See also 7 and the index of the many uses of the term on p. 455.

32 Cussianovich, 21. See also 60–64, 112, 164; Boff, *God’s Witnesses*, 4, 24.

33 Metz, *Followers of Christ*, 30. See also 31, 69.

Second, religious life as it was understood in the 19th and early 20th century paradigm was deemed unacceptable by many. We can live the past no more. The rigid, juridical, institutional, canonical approach to religious life with its emphasis on external performance was considered inappropriate for the day by many, particularly in light of an examination of the foundational sources. Patrick O’Connell, for example, summarizes in his introduction to Merton’s novice lectures, *The Life of the Vows*: “Too often in the course of monastic history, Merton suggests, the eschatological has been reduced to the institutional, the following of Christ to the following of rules. . . . Here Merton touches on the central claim of all his mature writings on monastic renewal, that it cannot simply be a reform of structures but must be a recovery of the monastic charism to witness to the hidden presence of God’s reign established definitively by the death and resurrection of Christ.”³⁴ Cussianovich complains that “the theology of the religious life came to be a theology of the states of perfection.”³⁵ Daniel Rees and members of the English Benedictine Congregation similarly suggest that “external observances and structures are truly at the service of the spirit and that fidelity to tradition is understood not as a paralysing rigidity but as true responsiveness to a living inspiration.”³⁶

The clear cry was for a “rethinking” of religious life, what I would call a theological re-imagination of consecrated life. Thomas Merton, in his 1964 “The Monk in the Diaspora” writes that, “it would be a very serious mistake to assume that the monastic order simply needs to be reshaped in a new contemporary mode, without a painstaking study of what is really essential to monasticism and what is not.”³⁷ Jean Leclercq in 1965 sees this task to be in the hands of a younger generation: “I think this young generation will have to carry on the creative task of re-thinking monastic spirituality.”³⁸ Don Gelpi in 1966 writes of the importance of the “task of rethinking.”³⁹ Sandra Schneiders writes regarding

34 O’Connell, “Introduction,” p. 78 Kindle version. See also “Monk in the Diaspora,” 298; *Dancing in the Water*, 139; *Learning to Love*, 108; Tardiff, ed. *At Home in the World*, 37; and Merton’s own assessment of his *The Life of the Vows* in *Other Side*, 40.

35 Cussianovich, *Religious Life and the Poor*, 35. See also 18, 35.

36 Daniel Rees et al. *Consider Your Call*, 6. See also Metz, *Followers of Christ*, 15, 18; Schneiders, *New Wineskins*, 19.

37 Merton, “Monk in the Diaspora,” 299.

38 Jean Leclercq in a letter to Thomas Merton [4/9/65] in Hart, ed. *Survival or Prophecy?*, 92.

39 Gelpi, *Functional*, 77.

the problems regarding our understanding of vows: “This does not, however, necessarily mean that they should be abandoned or replaced. It might mean, as I think it does, that profession itself and the vows in particular must be rethought for our time.”⁴⁰ Similarly, Italian Claretian Lozano proclaims, “Religious today must find a new explanation for their presence in the community of Jesus’ disciples by penetrating deeply into the biblical Word and the Church’s living tradition.”⁴¹

Finally—as the above mention of the biblical Word and Church’s tradition indicate—early post-conciliar dialogue also suggested elements of a method of theological reflection on religious life. This kind of reflection must be relevant.⁴² It must also be biblical,⁴³ and grounded in a careful recovery of key historical sources.⁴⁴ This rethinking must be foundational: mere “moving the furniture around” is insufficient.⁴⁵ It must be sensitive to theological method and theological developments.⁴⁶ It must be interdisciplinary: integrating insights from world religions, the human sciences and more.⁴⁷ And finally it must be practical, addressing such issues as common life, profession, vows, distinctions between lay and religious, friendships, asceticism, authority and so on.⁴⁸

It is interesting to note that as I reviewed this literature I found different emphases reflecting the different traditions of the authors. “Monastics,” like Leclercq and Merton emphasized the importance of a recovery of contemplation and the inner life. “Apostolic religious” like Schneiders or Boff,

40 Schneiders, *New Wineskins*, 69.

41 Lozano, *Discipleship*, xiii–xiv.

42 *Aggiornamento*. Relevant, for example, to Gelpi’s American religious “new breed” (*Functional*, 47–48); to Merton’s “postulants” (*Monastic Journey*, 121–32; cf. also *Survival or Prophecy?*, 83); the “poor” of Cussianovich (*Religious Life and the Poor*, 20); Schneiders’ “lived experience of women” (*New Wineskins*, 1–2). One might also include more generally the secularizing culture in Europe reflected in the writings of Metz, Rahner, and Leclercq.

43 For example, Leclercq, *The Life of Perfection*, 81–90; Tillard, *Devant Dieu*, 135–96; Cussianovich, *Religious Life and the Poor*, 29; Murphey-Oconnor, *What is Religious Life?*; Moloney, *Disciples and Prophets*.

44 This was stated explicitly in *Perfectae caritatis* 2. Historical recovery was an aim of both Leclercq and Merton. Schneiders develops this in terms of early women’s renunciation (see for example, *Wineskins*, 49). I will address historical recovery much further in the course of this first volume.

45 See for example Merton’s complaints about “adjustments” (*Survival or Prophecy?*, 97; *Monastic Journey*, 166); Leclercq on institutional reform in *Aspects*, 182. Central to all this (and mentioned everywhere) is a complete re-understanding demanded of the relationship between consecrated life and “the world.”

46 Cussianovich, *Religious Life and the Poor*, 47; Schneiders, *New Wineskins*, 21, 88. The literature I read included discussions of the theology of God, Christology, sin and salvation, the Spirit and charisms, perfection and holiness, baptism and profession, ecclesiology, eschatology, and more. I will address these matters more specifically in the second volume of this series.

47 See Cussianovich, *Religious Life and the Poor*, 47; Rees et al., *Consider Your Call*, 8–10; Hart, ed. *Survival or Prophecy?*, 87, 105; Boff, *God’s Witnesses*, 6–11; Wittberg, *Rise and Fall*; O’Murchu, *Religious Life*.

48 I can’t begin to recount references to these matters as most of the treatments cover a number of these issues.

emphasized presence to the world in need. Others, such as Murphey-O'Connor and Rees et al. place more emphasis on community life. It is interesting to see the classic distinction between “cave,” (contemplation) “refectory,” (community) and “road” (ministry) even in more recent discussions about religious life between 1960 and 1989.⁴⁹

The forty years between 1983 and 2023 have been—given the expectations following Vatican II—somewhat surprising. And perhaps for that very reason, I am convinced that the Roman call for theological re-imagination remains an unfinished call and is therefore just as relevant today as it was in 1983. First, changes in the demographics of Roman Catholic religious life present us with a portrait of consecrated life different than that found in 1983. Second, Roman Catholic theological/ecclesiastical trends have developed in ways unexpected by many in the 1960s and this has shaped the character of the life many religious desire. Finally, on top of demographic and theological developments, general cultural shifts have required still further re-imagination. Thus, the call from Rome is, to my understanding, still clear, yet incomplete. To illustrate, I will simply review the four themes I employed above in my summary of the years 1960–1989.

Yes, Roman Catholic religious in the twenty-first century see themselves in crisis—just as was the case around the time of Vatican II. Yet now it is not simply a crisis of identity, but a crisis of survival. Membership in religious orders had reached a peak in the mid-60s and the decline which followed into the 21st century was severe. Already in 1994 sociologist Patricia Wittberg documented these trends in her important account of *The Rise and Fall of Catholic Religious Orders: A Social Movement Perspective*. After rehearsing some of the statistics regarding religious life in the USA, she writes that “the overwhelming impression left by these figures is that canonical religious communities—especially communities of women, which had once been by far the most numerous—are now

49 On “cave,” “refectory,” and “road” see Ian Adams, *Cave, Refectory, Road*.

experiencing severe difficulties, and may even be facing imminent extinction.”⁵⁰ More recent data continues to show a general decline in membership in religious orders, and we hear reports of mergers and reconfigurations as orders or convents do not have sufficient staffing to support their communities or facilities.⁵¹ One matter of importance is that the demographic balance in religious life is shifting in a more global and diverse direction.⁵² Some wring their hands and bemoan the inevitable demise of religious life. Others perceive the situation as an opportunity for creative renewal. In his November 2014 announcement of the upcoming “Year of Consecrated Life,” (in the midst of this decline) Pope Francis called upon consecrated Christians to “wake up the world!”⁵³ No matter how we assess these trends, it is fair to perceive that the 1965 call to rethink religious life is still relevant today.

Second, whereas one could speak of a “progressive majority” soon after Vatican II—at least in terms of the discomfort by religious regarding the reigning paradigm of religious life⁵⁴—the situation has become more complicated since then. Issues of theology, culture, loyalties, and more are all intertwined in the developments between 1983 and 2023. In 1992 a group of women religious in the USA who were concerned with the direction of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR) received formal approval as the Council of Major Superiors of Women Religious (CMSWR).⁵⁵ Around this time, institutions of consecrated life began to emerge which lean in a more “traditional” direction with regard to things like wearing formal religious clothing, recitation of the

50 Wittberg, *Rise and Fall*, 2. More recently see O’Murchu, *Religious Life in the 21st Century* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2016), 229.

51 See, for example, Mary Johnson, Patricia Wittberg, Mary L. Gautier, *New Generations of Catholic Sisters: The Challenge of Diversity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 4–24; Mary L. Gautier, “Population Trends among Religious Institutes since 1970” in Thomas P. Gaunt, ed., *Pathways to Religious Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 15–35. The most careful recent research appears to indicate both decline in the West along with some areas of growth in the wider global religious communities. See for example, *Religious Life for Our World*, Kindle, pp. 42–43. Mergers and such ???

52 See Johnson, *New Generations*; Maria Cimperman and Roger Schroeder, eds., *Engaging Our Diversity: Interculturality and Consecrated Life Today* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2020).

53 See for example, The Year of Consecrated Life 2015 (cf. also “Statistics”); Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate [American Catholics] CARA Report 2020; *Vatican News* 14 March 2022 Dicastery; *Understanding the Consecrated Life in Canada: Critical Essays on Contemporary Trends* (2015); “Beyond Hierarchiology: Congar, Pope Francis and the Council’s Unfinished Liberation of Ecclesiology” in *The Promise of Renewal* (2023 Dominicans)

54 Schneiders, *New Wineskins*, 87–88.

55 For an excellent summary of CMSWR perspective, specifically with regard to a theology of religious life, see Council of Major Superiors of Women Religious, *The Foundations of Religious Life: Revisiting the Vision* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 2009).

divine office, residence in common, interpretation of the vows and other matters.⁵⁶ The fact of the matter is, the pendulum has swung a little and some are rethinking the rethinking. In 2009 Cardinal Rodé, representing the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life (CICLSAL) announced a formal “Apostolic Visitation” of American religious women, and in the same year the Vatican’s Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) declared that it was beginning a doctrinal assessment of LCWR’s faithfulness to the Catholic Church. This began a journey that threatened the very existence of the majority of vowed religious in the United States (one which has been appropriately termed a “crisis”),⁵⁷ a difficult journey that was not resolved for six years (and after a change in papacy).⁵⁸

My point in rehearsing all this drama is simply to state that the Roman call to reimagine religious/consecrated life is plainly unfinished. Indeed, one of the disputed matters among those who disagree about the nature of religious life is how faithful each has been to the mandate of the Vatican council to re-imagine their life. We must now assess not only Thomas Aquinas, but also Karl Rahner. We must sympathetically weigh the strengths and weaknesses of different models of religious obedience. We must evaluate religious life as both a spiritual movement and as an ecclesial institution. All this and more must shape the development of a theology of consecrated life for today.

And yet (third), whereas the call from the 60s through the 80s was more explicitly a call to *rethink*, the more prominent call I hear from Roman Catholic religious recently is a call to *(re)found*.⁵⁹

56 Examples. ??? I place the term “traditional” in quotations because that is itself one aspect of the question. Part of the mandate of Vatican II was to reassess each congregation in light of the original traditions of the founders and the early charism of the community. There are those who argue that a careful recovery of those original sources calls into question the “traditional” paradigm of religious life dominant from Trent through 1950. Just what *is* authentic tradition regarding consecrated life. See ???

57 For the stories of the women facing these dual challenges see, for example, *Power of Sisterhood* and *However Long the Night: Making Meaning in a Time of Crisis*.

58 For the official resolutions, see the “Apostolic Visitation Final Report” published at <https://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/vocations/consecrated-life/apostolic-visitation-final-report>; and the “Joint Final Report on the Doctrinal Assessment of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR) by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF), 16.04.2015 published at <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/it/bollettino/pubblico/2015/04/16/0278/00618.html>.

59 See, for example, Diarmuid O’Murchu, *Religious Life in the 21st Century: The Prospect of Refounding*; Amy Hereford, *See I am Making Something New: A Canonical and Pastoral Guide to Founding Religious Institutes, Diocesan Hermits, Consecrated Virgins and New Forms of Consecrated Life* (St. Louis, MO: Religious Life Project, 2018); Maria Cimperman, *Religious Life for Our World: Creating Communities of Hope* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2020). For an

Indeed, a number of new and creative institutes have emerged in the last thirty years.⁶⁰ Of course, refounding requires rethinking. As Cistercian Francis Kline asserts, “the foundations for our place in the Church are going to have to be (re?)discovered from our own lived experience, which may then feed academic and theological reflection.”⁶¹ Nevertheless, the theologies emerging from practical experiments take on a different character than merely reflective theologies. Indeed, this is one point that Latin American theologians of religious life made in the 70s. A theology of religious life must emerge from lived experience.

Part of the recent interest in founding new institutes of consecrated life develops from the revised categorization of consecrated (and religious) life expressed in the 1983 Code of Canon Law. While this code has received mixed evaluations regarding its treatment of consecrated life, one matter is clear. The new code opened the doorway for hermits, virgins and other new forms of consecrated life to establish themselves in formal association with the Catholic church.⁶² Whereas the Beguines of the thirteenth century had a difficult time finding any “place” to be welcomed by the church, the new code perhaps provides pathways of welcome for many who are longing for more.

Finally, we must consider what we learn about theological method from the developments within Roman Catholic consecrated life between 1989 and the present. First, the suggestions from 1960–1989 are still appropriate. Our reflections regarding consecrated life must be scripturally rooted, historically sound, interdisciplinary informed, and so on. At the same time I perceive a renewed interest

interesting collection of essays on rethinking, remodeling, refounding and such from specifically “monastic” institutes, see Patrick Hart, ed., *A Monastic Vision for the 21st Century: Where Do We Go from Here?* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 2006).

60 For an account of communities in France see Monique Hébrard, *Les Nouveaux Disciples: Voyage à travers les communautés charismatiques*, second edition (Paris: Éditions du Centurion, 1979). For a list of new institutes in the USA, see Patricia A. Wittberg and Mary L. Gautier, eds., *Emerging U.S. Communities of Consecrated Life since Vatican II*, third edition (Washington DC: Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, 2017).

61 Francis Kline, “To What Holiness? Monasticism and the Church Today,” in Hart, ed., *A Monastic Vision for the 21st Century*, 166.

62 In her “Toward a Theological Theory of Religious Life” (with material developed between 1976 and 1981), Schneiders writes that “what is especially interesting in our own times is the re-emergence within the movement of a wide variety of forms of religious life with which the juridical categories cannot deal.” Yet now (after 1983), see for example, Hereford, *Something New*; and Christiana Hip-Flores, *Hermits and Consecrated Virgins, Ancient Vocations in the Contemporary Catholic Church: A Canonical-Pastoral Study of Canons 603 and 604 Individual Forms of Consecrated Life* (No location: Fiat Press, 2018).

among some in approaching religious life guided by Thomistic frameworks, canon law, and sociological data.⁶³ What this means is that—as with my comments on theological shifts above—reflections on consecrated life today requires a broader conversation than might have been the case in 1970. We re-examine the assessments of Thomas Aquinas. We struggle to make meaning of canon law in dialogue with various official statements since Vatican II. We consider current trends regarding why people today enter or leave consecrated life. Merton’s exhortation to a “painstaking study of what is really essential to monasticism and what is not” feels to me more important now than it was when he wrote it. Not only a new range of sources, but even a new range of ways of looking at the sources must be considered as we attempt to contribute to the development of a theology of religious life for the 21st century.

Second, as I mentioned above, a primary interest currently is in *(re)founding*. Furthermore, it is an interest in founding from a wide range of global contexts. What this means for someone attempting a theology of consecrated life today is that (1) conclusions or syntheses can only be understood as provisional and limited, and (2) that part of the development of a theology of consecrated life must be a careful listening to the stories of those who are founding. Thus, in this work, I can only offer a small contribution to the task at hand.

Why attempt a theology of consecrated life? The current crisis calls for the completion of this unfinished task (or at least some conscious progress in light of current circumstances). Even within the context of Roman Catholic institutes, the call issued in Vatican II to rethink consecrated life remains both incomplete and now more complicated than ever. But of course, this is an *ecumenical* theology of religious life, and so we must consider not only the calls within the context of Roman Catholicism, but also the calls from outside the Roman Catholic sphere.

⁶³ See, for example, Council of Major Superiors of Women Religious, *Foundations*; works emerging from the Canon Law Society of America workshop in 2015 (Hereford, *Something New*, Hip-Flores, *Hermits and Consecrated Virgins*, and work forthcoming from Karla Rivera; works appearing from the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA – for example, Gaunt, *Pathways*). Note that much of CMSWR’s and CANA’s material reflects an American context.

Calls from Christianity Outside of Roman Catholic Institutes

We cannot approach the call(s) to re-imagine a theology of consecrated life from outside Roman Catholic circles as we did from those within. Whereas we can trace—at least to some extent—the call(s) within Roman Catholicism by examining official statements and the history of their interpretation and embodiment, we are obliged to recognize the calls from outside Roman circles (and particularly within Protestant circles⁶⁴) as we observe scattered statements and experiments arising and connecting. It is inappropriate to make too much of any one of these statements or experiments. We must not try to develop a full-blown theology of consecrated life, for example, from Alister McIntyre’s plea for a new Benedict, or from Bonhoeffer’s experiment at Finkenwalde. Furthermore, we must not identify the Protestant calls for more with appeals to greater holiness, a higher Christian life, a new baptism in the Spirit, or an increased faithfulness to the demands of Scripture. As we shall see, the consecrated life—at least as I am treating it here—is not a matter of increased devotion or experience, but of the commitment to a distinct form of life,⁶⁵ whether this distinct form of life is understood as the norm of all Christians (as with some Anabaptist expressions), or whether it is promoted as a model for a segment of the church (as is the case with Protestant religious orders).⁶⁶

I will organize my treatment of the development of the Protestant call(s) by means of an image: that of the accumulation of precipitation. Rain falls, perhaps even a shower, and drops of water hit the ground. Each drop—here or there—does not carry much significance of itself. But as these drops travel they collect in rivulets, beginning to flow in some direction. Raindrops—along with gravity—are the initiating context of the flow. The rivulets direct the flow itself. Some rivulets then gather into streams

64 Regarding my use of the term “Protestant”: I am aware that varieties of Anabaptists were persecuted and later marginalized by the magisterial Protestants affiliated with Luther, Calvin, Zwingli and their circles of influence. Many Anabaptists, Quakers and such reject the label *Protestant*. Likewise, the English reformation had a character of its own, trying to steer a course between what it perceived as Roman Catholicism and Continental Protestantism. Consequently some Anglican types are nervous about claiming to be *Protestant*. Nevertheless, in order to distinguish European Christian circles outside the Roman ecclesia from others such as the various forms of Orthodoxy, Coptic Christianity and so on, I will reluctantly retain the term Protestant

65 On form of life.

66 Acknowledging the ambiguities present in the concrete examples throughout history.

and streams into rivers, while others dissipate in somewhat random locations into the soil. With the formation of rivers, precipitation acquires force sufficient to make significant change in the surrounding environment. Discerning the force (the “call”) of precipitation is not simply a matter of noticing a few drops, but rather paying attention to the course of the flows.

The Development of Protestant Christianity and the Raindrops of a Call: 1518–1950

Just as we observed the call from Rome in light of Thomas Aquinas, the council of Trent, the liturgical renewal, and so on, so also we must observe the call from outside Rome in light of Martin Luther, the English Reformation, Anabaptist movements and more. It is a commonplace to proclaim that from the sixteenth century to the mid-twentieth these groups abandoned both the concept and the institutes of consecrated life. What is less common is studied reflection on the exceptions to the norm, or on themes that appear in early Protestant history only to reappear in new or revised forms in Protestant explorations of consecrated life. I see these exceptions and themes, along with a number of interesting isolated statements by Protestant figures, as so many raindrops falling upon the soil. I can provide here only the most minimal treatment and documentation, simply in order to demonstrate the developing call(s) to rethink consecrated life. A more thorough examination of Christian history will occupy the bulk of this volume.⁶⁷

Martin Luther was not the first to critique “monasticism.”⁶⁸ Diocesan priests, humanists, and monks themselves (and even members of Luther’s own order) had pressured for the reform of religious life long before Luther wrote his “*De Votis* [On Monastic Vows] (1521).” Yet Martin Luther—the monk, the priest, and the theological instructor—articulated a condemnation of the monasticism of his day that galvanized the Protestant rejection of monastic institutions. According to Luther, a vow that

67 For a general survey of the development of Protestant approaches to religious life, see Peters, *Reforming the Monastery*.

68 Martin Luther—and Protestants following him—tended to use the term “monasticism” as a catch all term for all forms of religious life then current. I will follow their own usage here. I have summarized some of the material regarding Magisterial and Anabaptist approaches to the key monastic question of “counsels and commandments” in Howard, “What Does God Expect? From Whom? And Why,” 38–79.

pleases God is rooted in Scripture, is wed to baptismal commitment and God's universal invitation, and is made in faith appropriate to any earthly vocation. A vow that displeases God goes beyond Scripture or our baptismal vows, misunderstands the notions of precepts and counsels, and wrongly measures perfection. For these reasons (and more) Luther was convinced that the institution of monasticism needed to end. Yet at the same time, Luther perceived the value of communities living distinct forms of life. Lutherans permitted a few convents, for example the Benedictine monastery at Schlüchtern, to continue—with necessary reforms—their life together. Luther advocated for the model of monastic life to be adapted for educational purposes, without the elitism of monastic presumptions. Indeed, as Leland Saak argues, "In the course of twenty years, Luther domesticated monasticism, transforming the school of Christ into church, school, and family, the three institutions that were to form and shape the morals and faith of the new religion."⁶⁹ This is not merely a shallow rejection of monasticism, but rather a complete rethinking in light of a Protestant theological perspective. Furthermore, a few convents were permitted. For the most part, John Calvin (1509–1564), Huldrych Zwingli (1484–1531), and the promoters of the English Reformation (particularly from 1521–1543), ultimately followed Luther in these matters, both disbanding and re-purposing monastic institutions in light of Protestant theological interests.

Yet the magisterial forms of Protestantism—Lutheran, Reformed, Church of England—were not the only forms of European religion to break with Rome. We must also examine what are often labeled "Anabaptist" forms of life.⁷⁰ On the one hand, like the magisterial Protestants, Anabaptists broke with Rome. They had no interest in affiliation with bishops, abbots, or orders. And yet, some exhibited sufficient similarities to monastic communities that sixteenth-century magisterial Reformers

69 Eric Leland Saak, "Martin Luther and the Monastic World of the Later Middle Ages" in *The Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 12. Accessed online on September 19, 2023 at <https://oxfordre.com/religion/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780199340378.001.0001/acrefore-9780199340378-e-370>.

70 As with the term "Protestant," the label "Anabaptist" tends to simplify a more complicated reality. On forms of "Anabaptist" spirituality, see Peter C. Erb, "Anabaptist Spirituality," in Frank C. Senn, ed. *Protestant Spiritual Traditions* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1986).

derided them by associating them with Roman monastic expressions.⁷¹ Some communities lived together, sharing possessions. They expected a high level of obedience within their ranks, both to the Sermon on the Mount and to their leaders. They spoke of entrance as a second (re)baptism. And more. The differences between Anabaptist communities and other Protestant expressions were practical, theological, and spiritual. What we must perceive is the Anabaptist rethinking of the monastic ideal in the context of their own situation and theology. While it is difficult to identify direct influence of monastic literature on Anabaptist formation, it is clear that Anabaptist groups often expressed values and encouraged practices (emphasis on formation, formal conscious commitments, common life . . .) that closely resembled monastic, or at least semi-monastic life.

What we must understand here is that it is a superficial assessment of the “Protestant Reformation(s)” simply to say that they rejected Roman Catholic monasticism. Deeper rethinking is involved: rethinking regarding the relationships between theology, community, spirituality, and practice. At the same time we must recognize that, till the eighteenth century, this Protestant rethinking was comprehended—with few exceptions—within the context of “church,” embracing a single-form ecclesiology which gave little place for a distinction between “religious” and “secular” vocations.

That single-form ecclesiology—and the institutions that reflected it—was to be stretched in the centuries that followed. In the early seventeenth century Nicholas Ferrar and family formed a community known as “Little Gidding” in Cambridgeshire, England, a community whose life together was criticized as being a “Protestant nunnery.” Count Nicholas Ludwig von Zinzendorf in 1716 formed, with a group of students, a kind of knightly order, The Order of the Mustard Seed, dedicated to the glory of Jesus Christ. Their order was expressed through a simple Rule, sealed by a solemn covenant, and was symbolized by an article of clothing (a ring). Eighteenth-century Methodist “bands” employed common practices, not necessarily those expected of all Christians, to grow in maturity and

71 See, for example, in Timothy Troutner, ““The New Monkery”: Michael Sattler and the Benedictine Roots of Anabaptism” *Plough* (September 16, 2020); available at <https://www.plough.com/en/topics/faith/anabaptists/the-new-monkery>, accessed November 15, 2020. On the similarities see Erb, “Anabaptist Spirituality,” 87.

express the faith to others. Later Zinzendorf would be involved in the founding of the Herrnhut community.⁷²

In the nineteenth century, interest grew further and deeper, at times expressing explicit interest in monastic institutions. Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard once wrote (1847), “Of this there is no doubt, our age and Protestantism in general may need the monastery again, or wish it were there. “The ‘monastery’ is an essential dialectical element in Christianity. We therefore need it like a navigation buoy at sea in order to see where we are. . . . But if there really is true Christianity in every generation there must also be individuals who have this need.”⁷³ Regarding the nineteenth-century Oxford Movement (also identified by the term “Tractarians”), Ruth Kenyon writes, “The revival of the ‘Religious’ or Monastic Life in the English Church was an aspiration of the Tractarians from the very beginning.”⁷⁴ A wide range of experimental “utopian” communities emerged in the nineteenth century, particularly in the United States, some of them explicitly shaped by reflection on the history of monasticism.⁷⁵ Raindrops and small rivulets, pointing to the need to continue thinking about consecrated life.

In the first half of the twentieth century we only witness the drops and rivulets increasing. The Bruderhof (Anabaptist roots) was founded in the midst of the devastation on Germany after World War I during the 1920s. The Iona community (Church of Scotland) was formed in the midst of the hardships of the 1930s. From 1935–37 Dietrich Bonhoeffer established and directed Finkenwalde, an alternative community/seminary in Germany with a semi-monastic rhythm and common life. It was during this period that he wrote to his brother proclaiming the need for ‘a sort of new monasticism.’⁷⁶ The (ultimately ecumenical, but initially Protestant) Taizé community in France was founded in 1940

72 Documentation for all this.

73 Søren Kierkegaard, *Papers and Journals*, VIII 1 A 403 (1847), p. 275.

74 Ruth Kenyon, “The Social Aspect of the Catholic Revival.” In *Northern Catholicism: Centenary Studies in the Oxford and Parallel Movements*, edited by N. P. Williams and Charles Harris (London: SPCK, 1933), 387, cited in Peters, *Reforming the Monastery*, 67.

75 Documentation

76 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “Letter to Karl-Friedrich Bonhoeffer” (London, January 14, 1935), in Bonhoeffer, *A Testament to Freedom*, 424

during the Second World War. Koinonia Farm was founded in 1942 by Baptists Clarence and Florence Jordan and Mabel England as a “demonstration plot for the kingdom of God.”⁷⁷ These are only samples. What is important here, I say again, is to see the somewhat isolated drops falling here and there, yet communicating similar themes and pointing toward the need to rethink consecrated life more generally.

Rivulets Develop: @1950–mid-1980s

What I notice between 1950 and the mid-1980s are small, but real, developments. We see *networks* of Christian communities emerge (both formal and informal). We see Protestants (or Roman Catholics writing about Protestants) beginning to reflect *theologically* about monasticism. We see Protestants starting to promote some kind of *recovery* of religious orders and such. Together, these forces begin to collect and distribute the disparate longings of Protestant Christians for both expressions and theologies of consecrated life.

The dual but interpenetrating movements of evangelicalism and the charismatic renewal gave birth not only to a number of Christian communities, but also to networks of communities.⁷⁸ Just as the monastery of Cluny in the middle ages spawned daughter communities, so the pioneering evangelical community of L’Abri in Switzerland (founded in 1955) spawned a daughter community in England in 1971.⁷⁹ The evangelical “Jesus movement,” usually dated from the late 1960s through the early 1970s, inspired converts to experiment with Christian “communes” and other expressions of intentional Christian community. These Christian expressions—such as the Jesus People USA community in Chicago, Shiloh ministries in Oregon, and the houses associated with the ministries of David Wilkerson in New York City (and many more), often would connect with one another through informal visits, mutual support, or through media such as the Voice of Elijah’s *Truth* from Spokane, Washington, a

⁷⁷ Documentation.

⁷⁸ For the history of evangelicalism after 1950 see ????. For the history of the charismatic renewal movement see ???

⁷⁹ For the early story of L’Abri see Edith Schaeffer, *L’Abri*. For the story of the British expression and other daughter expressions see the L’Abri website <https://labri.org/>.

Jesus People newspaper which highlighted stories from a variety of communities within their pages.⁸⁰ Similarly, the charismatic renewal fostered the establishment of a number of interconnected Protestant, Catholic, and ecumenical communities, many of which connected through conferences, shared literature, leader interconnection, and more.⁸¹ A number of influential communities with an interest in social engagement were started during this period (Reba Place Fellowship [1957], Post-American/Sojourners [1971], Jubilee Partners [1979] and more), communities which supported one another and ultimately fostered the Shalom Mission Communities and the Nurturing Communities Network.

During this same period, and perhaps in light of the flowering of Christian communities, some began to reflect—even theologically—on the phenomena of Christian community. Karl Barth, in part IV.2 of his monumental *Church Dogmatics*, begins to ask the question of the perhaps important value, embodied in the monastic institutions, of a rhythm of withdrawal. Barth developed his thoughts on monasticism further in a letter responding to the inquiry of a Vatican commission in 1966. In this letter he affirms that “monasticism has an exemplary role in the life of the Church,” that it gives witness to God “in the world, towards the world, and for the world,” and that it stands or falls on its being “summoned and steered only by the Word of God.”⁸² Donald Bloesch, decades before the publication of his multi-volume theological survey, publishes two books reflecting on the development of Christian communities, communities he saw as “centers” or “wellsprings” of Christian renewal.⁸³ In each book, along with documenting the life of a number of communities, Bloesch offers reflections on what a

80 For the Jesus movement, see for example Ronald Enroth, Edward E. Ericson Jr., and C. Breckinridge Peters, *The Jesus People: Old-Time Religion in the Age of Aquarius* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1972); Richard Bustraan, *The Jesus People Movement: A Story of Spiritual Revolution among the Hippies* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2014); Marc S. Allan, *What Happened to You? Hippies, Gospel Outreach and the Jesus People Revival* (Enumclaw, WA: Redemption Press, 2016).

81 P.D. Hocken documents the development of these communities and their networks (with greater emphasis on the Roman Catholic expressions) in his “Charismatic Communities,” in Stanley M. Bugess, editor, *The New International Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements*, revised and expanded edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 473–76.

82 See Luigi Gioia, “Word of God and Monasticism in Karl Barth,” *American Benedictine Review* 68/4 (2017), 418–432. See especially 419–420. See also Peters, *Reforming* . . .

83 See Donald Bloesch . . .

Protestant theology of intentional Christian community might look like. In his 1978 treatment, he openly begins a dialogue with Christian monasticism, a dialogue he maintains within the remainder of his works.⁸⁴ In 1963 (and during the proceedings of Vatican II) Helicon Press published the English translation of *The Rise of Protestant Monasticism* by François Biot, a Dominican scholar. In the first half of his book Biot covers similar ground as I have done here, documenting the development of Protestant experiments and attitudes from Luther through the 1950s. In the second half of the book, Biot presents “theological justifications,” reflections on the awakened church, on the church and the world, and on vocation. In these reflections, Biot begins to imagine—on behalf of Protestants—a theology of consecrated life. Similarly in 1971, Anglican Donald Allchin penned a little pamphlet entitled *The Theology of the Religious Life: An Anglican Approach*.⁸⁵ In this fifteen-page pamphlet Allchin expresses—as a Protestant—a conscious re-imagining a theology of religious life. And finally, I must mention here the landmark work of missiologist Ralph Winter, who in 1973 published an article on “The Two Structures of God’s Redemptive Mission,” openly promoting the value of the Roman Catholic understanding of religious orders.⁸⁶ Winter’s musings became concrete experiments in the decades that followed.

Storms Falling and Streams Forming: Mid 1980s to 2010

Roman Catholics had already begun to rethink their life and some of their reflections were available to Protestants, who in turn translated the wisdom for their own circles. In 1978 Quaker author Richard Foster published *Celebration of Discipline*, a moment that perhaps marked a turning point in the Western Protestant world: the beginning of the spiritual formation movement.⁸⁷ Right about this time biblical scholar Marcus Borg, then in his mid-30s, was beginning to have encounters with God, encounters that might identify, like the publication of *Celebration of Discipline*, a shift from “academic

84 See Peters.

85 Donald Allchin, *The Theology of the Religious Life: An Anglican Approach* (Fairacres, Oxford: SLG Press, 1971).

86 document

87 document

liberal” to “spiritual progressive.”⁸⁸ The spirituality/spiritual formation movement was born. Through the books, magazines, courses and conferences and much more that followed, many Protestant Christians became exposed to literature, practices, experiences and values associated with historic Christian monasticism. In the context of these storms of the spirituality movement, fresh waters fell and gathered into a number of streams.

One stream was the new friars network. Emerging out of the vision of Ralph Winter for Christian sodalities inspired by Catholic religious orders, a number of mission organizations—with perhaps 100 teams worldwide—emerged which consciously sought to blend Protestant mission interests with aspects of consecrated life.⁸⁹ Around this same time in the United Kingdom, two developments were taking place. The first was a rediscovery of the Celtic monastic heritage, a rediscovery that involved the cooperative work of scholars, like Ian Bradley, and creative foundations, like the Northumbria community.⁹⁰ The second was the Fresh Expressions movement, emerging from the Church of England and beyond. The Fresh Expressions movement re-oriented local church to think of their life more missionally, and advocated for creative experiments to explore this mission. A number of mutually supporting Christian communities—many of them with conscious connections with Christian monastic traditions—were formed in the midst of this season of experiment.⁹¹

I can go on to speak of the “community of communities” stream (which itself morphed into the Nurturing Communities Network stream), groups of communities associated with Reba Place Fellowship, Hope Fellowship and their circle; or the Study Center movement, some of whom were experimenting with community life in the context of higher education; or the communities that ultimately formed the North American Network of Charismatic Covenant communities; or the semi-

88 Marcus Borg tells this story in his *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1994), 8–17. The naming of the shift from liberal to progressive is mine, not Borg’s.

89 See for example, Scott Bessenecker, *The New Friars: The Emerging Movement Serving the World’s Poor* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2006); Scott Bessenecker, editor, (*Living Mission: The Vision and Voices of New Friars*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010).

90 document

91 See Graham Cray, et al. eds. *New Monasticism as Fresh Expression of Church* (Norwich: Canterbury, 2010); *Mission-Shaped ChurchReport*; <https://freshexpressions.org.uk/what-is-fx/our-story/> ???

monastic experiments that were explored among mainline churches associated with the Missional Wisdom Foundation.⁹² Yet perhaps more significant was the birth of “new monasticism”: as a phrase, an identifiable social movement (covered in media), and as a stream that then inspired other streams.⁹³ Once again, the sharing of members, the mutual creation of gatherings and literature, the shared email lists and so on, all demonstrate the “flowing together” character of this stream at that time. Yet associated with this stream was that term “monasticism.” Once again, a significant contingent of people were consciously identifying with something monastic. Daily office, Rules of life, and vows of stability were all part of the conversation. Protestants were rethinking and refounding consecrated life. As with Ahanasius’ *Life of Antony* (@356) and Thomas Merton’s (1948) *Seven Story Mountain*, Shane Claiborne’s (2006) *Irresistible Revolution* captured the longing of a generation and people flocked to join what they thought might be a clear, tangible expression of the heart of God.

Rivers Form as Streams Connect: 2010—the Present

The heat of the “new monastic” trend has passed. Yet—in spite of misunderstandings—it was never *the* new monastic movement, but rather (as we have seen) was one stream feeding others even while dissipating here or there. Indeed, new streams have emerged and are (1) interconnecting with one another more and more and (2) more consciously “monastic” than ever before. We see the emergence of the European Network of Communities, the Nurturing Communities Network, the Order of the Common Life, the Order of the Mustard Seed, the New Monastic Roundtable and much more.⁹⁴ The

92 See <https://www.nurturingcommunities.org/>; studycentersonline.org ???; <https://nanccc.org/>. For the Missional Wisdom experiments see Elaine A. Heath and Scott T. Kisker. *Longing for Spring: A New Vision for Wesleyan Community*. New Monastic Library (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2010); Elaine A. Heath and Larry Duggins. *Missional. Monastic. Mainline.: A Guide to Starting Missional Micro-Communities in Historically Mainline Denominations* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Press, 2014).

93 In 2008 I was the convener of a group sponsored by the Society for the Study of Christian Spirituality and the American Academy of Religion on “New Monasticism.” Four people presented papers on the topic. I presented the first one, introducing the topic and our discussion. That presentation, which can be seen as an earlier exploration of what I am offering here, can be found at <https://spiritualityshoppe.org/introducing-new-monasticism/>. For an introduction to this stream at that time, see especially Rutba House, eds. *School(s) for Conversion: 12 Marks of a New Monasticism* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Press, 2005).

94 My own select list of new monastic expressions can be found at <https://spiritualityshoppe.org/resources-for-christian-living/links/>.

book tables at their gatherings share resources from one network to another. Folks associated with one stream now attend gatherings of other streams. Like root systems between trees, communities are connecting, catalyzing, collaborating, and cultivating each other's lives as they cooperatively rethink the nature of consecrated life for the twenty-first century. This is not, like McGrath's call for a new Benedict, or Bonhoeffer's short-lived experiment at Finkenwalde, merely a matter of isolated affirmations of monasticism. The rain has fallen and we are now seeing rivers, cutting into the soil with force. The river calls for our attention.

Yet I repeat, the call(s) from Protestant Christianity are not explicit, as with those within the context of Roman Catholic circles. There is no common and clear statement like *Perfectae caritatis*, which all might look to and interpret. Rather we must notice the not-quite random distribution of calls here and there that collect and interpenetrate. We must recognize fragments: valuable, yet fragments nonetheless.⁹⁵ The call(s) must be collected and distilled, a process which both sees and distorts what it sees. There are no Protestant "theologies of religious life" to which one might turn for models of how to proceed with this (re)imagining. And yet Roman Catholics have been thinking about this for a long time. A "Protestant" theology of consecrated life is not enough. We must forge ecumenical theologies of consecrated life.

A Note From Eastern Christianities

Methodology and the Call from Outside the Roman Catholic Institutes (on method cf. further in next chapter)

The Call(s) from the World

Current situation

95 On "fragments," see Willie Jennings, *After Whiteness*, ???

Conclusion – Why an ecumenical theology of consecrated life for the 21st century?

Notes -

- The Ten Questions and Defining a Field of Study
- Why “Consecrated” Life?