

Religious orders are facing crisis

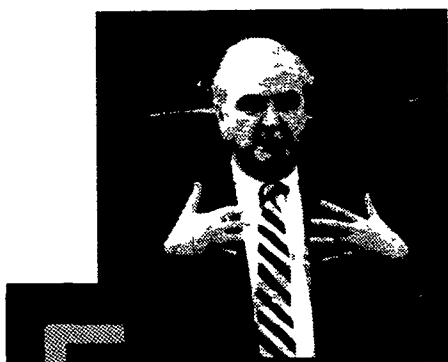
By Father Richard P. McBrien
Syndicated columnist

The Sept. 24 issue of *Origins* reproduces in full the "executive summary" of a three-year study on the future of religious orders in the United States. The study was conducted by Father David Nygren, a Vincentian, and Sister Miriam Ukeritis, of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet. Both are psychologists at DePaul University in Chicago.

It is not my purpose here to analyze the summary, but rather to highlight items that have special significance for the whole church.

The study underscores what is obvious to every informed observer: religious orders are in a crisis situation today. The average age of members of many congregations is approximately 67 and the number of religious has decreased in the last 30 years by 45 percent for brothers and sisters and by 27 percent for priests.

Only an ostrich could pretend that religious life in the United States will eventually recover the look and vitality it had in the 1950s, without any fundamental change in its structure. The "ostriches" assure one another that prosperity is just around the corner and that it will be achieved somehow through spiritual and tactical means alone: a dose of prayer and fasting; a dose of sacrifice; a dose of one-on-one vocational recruiting; and



ESSAYS IN THEOLOGY

a jolt of divine intervention (*deus ex machina*).

This careful and extensive study insists, on the contrary, that without significant institutional change religious congregations in the United States will continue to decline and, more importantly, those who most need their help will not be cared for adequately.

According to the study, the kind of change that is called for is "transformation," a social scientific concept that refers to fundamental shifts in members' shared understanding of their organization or community, generating, in turn, changes in the organization's mission, strategy, and struc-

tures.

Transformation usually occurs when there is a crisis that challenges a community's shared understandings. The crisis exposes their inadequacy for making sense of new realities in the world and for focussing and directing the community's activities in the light of these new realities.

The worst organizational responses to a crisis of this sort are to pull up the drawbridge and mount the barricades, or to make no response at all.

Such a crisis can be prompted by transitions in leadership, by the alienation of powerful sub-groups within the community who believe that their interests are no longer being served, by management practices that are no longer successful, or, most typically, by a "major environmental shift" that challenges traditional ways of understanding the nature and purpose of the organization.

In the case at hand, it was the Second Vatican Council that provided the "environmental shift."

When the crisis became strong enough to challenge our traditional understandings of religious congregations and of the church as a whole, an "unfreezing" took place.

Various individuals and sub-groups within religious congregations and the church began developing alternative understandings, leading to new types of behaviors and ministries and to changes in organizational struc-

tures.

Since these new types of action usually take place outside a community's traditional boundaries, it is not surprising that they affected a breakdown of formerly established boundaries within religious congregations and the church as a whole.

When this happened, many individuals and sub-groups were emotionally affected.

Common feelings have included shock, defensiveness, loss, and anger. Some have also experienced ambiguity and confusion because it has been unclear to them that any satisfactory new understanding is taking hold or because they are faced with what the scientific jargon calls "multiple potential perspectives."

Conflicts among sub-groups within religious congregations and the church have added to the tension.

As a particular perspective appeared to have gained the upper hand at official levels, a strong sense of satisfaction surfaced within the favored sub-groups. This, in turn, antagonized, angered, and demoralized those individuals and sub-groups that perceived themselves excluded from the loop.

Such forces are at work today, and they are contributing to an intensification of the crisis. Only enlightened leadership can help us deal effectively with them.

More about leadership next week.

Booklets differ widely on workers' rights

By Gregory F. Augustine Pierce
Syndicated columnist

Two very different publications came across my desk this week. The first was a little eight-page pamphlet by the Glenmary Commission on Justice titled *Catholic Teachings on the Rights of Workers*, and the other was a 42-page workbook from the National Institute of Business Management titled *Fire at Will: Terminating Your Employees Legally*.

What struck me was the gulf between the two booklets. The Glenmary pamphlet summarizes 100 years of Catholic support for workers' rights. It quotes Pope John XXIII's 1963 encyclical *Pacem in Terris*: "It is clear that (the human person) has a right by the natural law not only to an opportunity to work, but also to go about (that) work without coercion."

A pastoral letter by the U.S. Catholic bishops in 1919 states that:



FAITH AND WORK

"Authentic and effective labor unions run by workers are the surest way to achieve the social objectives of full employment and fair wages."

And Pope Paul VI said in a 1972

address: "In work, it is (the human person) who comes first. An end has been put to the priority of work over the worker, to the supremacy of technical and economic necessities over human needs."

In contrast, the National Institute of Business Management workbook comes at the question of workers' rights as a legal technicality that needs to be overcome through shrewd management practices: "When it comes to managing your work force, you may feel bombarded on all sides by those who would challenge your right to hire and fire as you see fit.

"It's true that there are various forces restricting that right: the myriad of workplace regulatory laws that tend to inhibit your control over wages, working conditions and your employees; restriction on dealing with labor unions; and controls over health and safety practices.

"But as constricting as the laws and

regulations may appear to be, you also have a lot more authority to make your own determinations and to use the laws to your advantage than you may realize."

In addition to providing a variety of approaches for legally opposing unions and terminating employees, *Fire at Will* advises employers to require all employees to sign an "at-will statement," specifying that they may be terminated at the discretion of the employer for any reason.

It is clear that Catholic teaching on workers' rights is not even a consideration for the National Institute of Business Management. The question for believers is: should it be?

EDITORS' NOTE: The Glenmary Commission on Justice can be reached at Box 576, Neon, Ky. 41840; the National Institute of Business Management's address is P.O. Box 25347, Alexandria, Va. 22313.

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