

Church can no longer afford 'typical'

By Father Richard P. McBrien
Syndicated columnist

An important new study of the future of religious orders in the United States offers a realistic picture of the crisis confronting religious life and the church today.

The report's authors — Vincentian Father David Nygren and Sister Miriam Ukeritis, CSJ — solicited input from more than 10,000 religious priests, sisters, and brothers. Their purpose was "to provide information that will help religious understand the choices before them and to orient them toward their possible futures."

Not excluding the crucial role of divine grace, those "possible futures" will be determined by the ways religious congregations and the church respond to the present crisis.

If the responses are marked by defensiveness and denial, or if only incremental and cosmetic changes are initiated, the outcome will not be a happy one. Religious congregations will continue to decline, the people they have traditionally cared for will no longer be served, and the church will be deprived of an important witness to the Gospel.

The report concludes that the negative trends can be reversed only through transformational change involving a new understanding of the religious congregation and its mission.

But such change is threatening and



destabilizing for many, and so they resist it. On the other hand, those who support change are not always clear about where and how they want to go with it. Conflicts result.

Leaders have a strong impact on the outcome of conflict. If they support only one side (or are perceived to support only one side), they are likely to decrease the "potential creativity" of the transformational process and the involvement of members whose perspectives are not taken into account.

But if leaders enable conflicting perspectives to interact with each other, they increase the chances that new and shared understandings will develop.

According to the study, leaders of

religious congregations are of four kinds: value-based, visionary, conflicted, and incognizant.

Value-based leaders have a strong sense of direction and of congregational identity, but they are more conceptual than practical. They lack strategies for implementing their good ideas.

Visionary leaders have not only a sense of direction and identity, but also a strategy for implementing them.

Conflicted leaders are unable to address change and seem always burdened with frustration, anger, sadness, and even despair. Often the anger is directed at their own members.

Incognizant leaders are unconscious or unaware of the major issues facing their orders. They tend to appeal to spiritual remedies to fix everything.

The report makes a second distinction, between transformational and transactional leaders.

Transformational leaders provide vision and a sense of mission. They instill pride in their members, while gaining their respect and trust.

Transactional leaders, on the other hand, focus on administrative and operational details. They orient their subordinates toward achieving goals. They monitor their performance, reward accomplishments, and take corrective action when problems occur. Sometimes they abdicate responsibility and avoid making decisions.

Only transformational leadership can guide religious congregations and

the church through the present crisis.

The study shows that leaders whom their members regard as "outstanding" rather than "typical" had these qualities and competencies: an ability to articulate the mission of their congregations, a capacity to act efficiently, basic conceptual and analytical skills, self-confidence, and avoidance of impulsive or emotional expression.

They want to perform their tasks better than they had been performed in the past; they want to find new ways to achieve congregational goals; and they want to make things better for those their order serves.

"Outstanding" leaders also differ from "typical" leaders in that they are willing to use their power to influence group decisions and behavior; they build consensus and team spirit by soliciting others' views; they attempt to see issues from different perspectives; and they draw on divine assistance in their leadership roles.

"Typical" leaders are inclined to threaten sanctions to control subordinates; invoke formal authority instead of building consensus; involve themselves in individual members' personal problems rather than the problems of the entire congregation; and, surprisingly, seldom refer to God in relation to their leadership activity.

In a time of crisis and transformation, the church can no longer afford the "typical." Only "outstanding" leadership will suffice.

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