

***Fourth Annual St Thomas More Lecture***  
***The Mission and Character of Religious Institutions,***  
***Then, Now and Looking Forward***  
**Fr. Mark Raper SJ, AM**  
**Provincial of the Australian Jesuits**  
**18 June 2008**

In T S Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*, when Thomas Becket is confronted with the murderous knights of King Henry II, he meets them with the words: "I am not in danger: only near to death." The theme of my address tonight may be similar to Becket's: "Religious Life: not in danger, only near to death".

These are desert days for religious. From a sociological and historical point of view, religious life appears quite near to death. We experience diminishment, disappointment and discouragement. Yet from deserts also springs new life. Few things are more exhilarating than new life in the desert. Moreover deserts are the natural place for prophets to prepare. Our vocation is precisely that: to be prophets. We now have a time, our present time, to prepare. We now have a place, the desert wilderness of our contemporary society, to prepare for our true vocation.

Undeniably religious life is at a crossroads. In reality, even and perhaps especially in this desert, we have reasons for hope and grounds for gratitude. In these days religious are becoming clearer about who we are, why we were founded, what our role in the church is, what will build community and what will take us all into the future. Religious life is an affirmation that God is supremely good all the time and to everyone. Religious life is based on faith in the triune God who is and who generates community, who is active and at work in all people and things and places. Because we have met and experienced such a God, we religious choose a counter-cultural life that desires profound alternatives to the competitive, secular and individualistic ways of living that are accepted today by so many as inevitable.

Our ageing and diminishing numbers tell an undeniable story of decline. In the 1970s, we recorded some 17,500 religious women, brothers and priests in the Australian Church, while today we count fewer than 8,000, and the average age of women religious is in their 70s. We will soon be far fewer. Some communities have not received novices for years. For some their youngest members are in their fifties.

There are around 140 religious orders in Australia, comprising over 40 clerical religious orders, some 5 orders of brothers, and 80 or 90 separate orders of women. The largest of these, the Sisters of Mercy, number over 1,500, and, for the moment at least, are distributed across 17 different congregations. Counted this way we have around 175 leaders of religious orders who make

up the membership of Catholic Religious Australia. While a few of the orders working in Australia are 5, 7 or 8 centuries old, the majority were founded in 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Century Europe. Those founded in Australia include the Sisters of St Joseph, the Good Samaritans, the Grey Sisters, and the Missionary Sisters of Service, founded in Tasmania. The Canberra-based Missionaries of God's Love is not yet a religious order, but they are a community that demonstrates remarkable vitality and attraction to young people.

All of these orders, whenever we were founded, have been shaped by the "parochial culture" of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, a period of definite blooming of religious life. We may, understandably, regret the passing of that age. Yet some new and different things are happening in our Church at the moment. Alongside the numerical diminishment and ageing of religious there is also a surge in lay involvement and lay leadership in mission. There is also a growth in the institutions that were originally inspired by religious, especially in health care, education and social services.

Among the conditions forcing change, we may also include the stigma of abuse, which marks many sectors of the Church today. Like the Church as a whole, religious communities are buffeted by the cultural and historical forces at work in society.

Not all religious orders will continue. Some may discern that they have simply fulfilled their mandate. Some are simply not blessed with new life. But since their charism was a gift to the whole Church, all have a responsibility to see that their original inspiration can be institutionalised. There are different arrangements whereby religious congregations make the needed accommodations, such as:

**Consolidation:** where several provinces or congregations of the same inspiration amalgamate into one unit. The Christian Brothers have just formed one province for Oceania and the Mercy Sisters are considering uniting.

**Integration:** where laypersons are invited to take leadership roles in mission within the corporate ministries of a congregation. Eg, most health care and education institutions are moving this way.

**Partnerships:** Where congregations cannot continue to run their institutions alone, so enter cooperative partnerships with other congregations. Eg MacKillop Family Services brings together Christian Brothers, Josephite and Mercy Sisters social services works.

**Transfer:** Congregations create new juridical persons and set up trustees that will govern this new body. Eg Mary Aikenhead Ministries, Edmund Rice Education Australia.

**Networks:** Some new ministries are effectively cooperative expressions of a religious inspiration. Eg, Jesuit Refugee Service.

**Individual initiatives:** They begin in the initiative of a member of the Congregation, do not carry its identity, but reflect its spirit. Eg, Land Mines movement commenced by Sr Patricia Pak Poy RSM

Some communities have been particularly vigorous in renaming and reshaping their lives and work. You may have seen recently the plans and new directions of the Christian Brothers. Provincial Br Vince Duggan announced the establishment of new structures as a "dynamic process in which the Holy Spirit is active, unsettling yet also encouraging us to leap further into the Mystery of God."

Br Vince spoke of five key directions for the brothers which they will review at their forthcoming Chapter. These include engaging more deeply in matters of spirituality and interfaith relations, commitment to exploration of the charism of Edmund Rice, and to life-long formation for brothers. They also include "working more extensively with people marginalised and made vulnerable by society and supporting them further by advocating liberation and justice in all activities" as well as "recognising the urgent necessity for living in a sustainable way and valuing the gift of creation." The Brothers' network of schools established throughout Australia is now under the auspices of a new lay-led governing body called Edmund Rice Education Australia.

Those who dislike change, or simply those who value the schooling they received from the Christian brothers, may be disquieted by these apparent changes in direction. But it is helpful to look at the original inspiration of the Christian Brothers in order to understand what is happening to them now. Like a number of other religious orders, they had their rise in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Edmund Rice along with other prophetic figures like Catherine McAuley, Mary Aikenhead, responded to the new poverty consequent on the Industrial Revolution, and began to help the poor as laypersons. They then formed the Christian Brothers, the Mercy Sisters, and the Sisters of Charity in order to continue this heroic service. Another contemporary, Frederick Ozanam, founded the lay movement, St Vincent de Paul Society. It was at the same time that Karl Marx released his Communist Manifesto; Charles Dickens was writing Bleak House and Hard Times, and Victor Hugo completing Les Misérables.

These congregations have given great service to the Australian Catholic community. The orders still own or influence many health care, social service and educational institutions. But these enterprises are today supported in large part by the government and administered by lay persons. Clearly many needs remain, including the need to encourage and support this transition to lay participation in ministry and to ensure that the institutions they set up retain their Catholic identity and remain 'on mission'. But the orders also may argue that the great work they began, for example in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century,

has reached a point of completion. The brothers and sisters, meanwhile, are moving to the edge, offering a prophetic service in line with their calling.

There was a time for almost all in the Australian Church when our first contact with the faith was largely mediated through religious sisters and brothers in our Catholic schools. Now the call to holiness, to witness and to communion is being mediated to others also by lay persons. This is not simply an organisational adjustment because of lack of sufficient ordained ministers, a fall back position to fill in the numbers. Nor is it simply a sociological development consequent on the democratic movements in our broader culture. It is the way the Spirit is alive in our Church and in our hearts. There is a happy confluence between lay people ready to serve the Church in these newer ways, and the mission religious have long claimed for themselves.

Each of the religious founders responded imaginatively to the suffering of their time. Claire and Francis of Assisi showed that a total self giving in poverty, a total reliance on the goodness of God, created the greatest security possible.

Behind the inspiration of each religious order is an imaginative response to the suffering and human dilemmas of their times. In our times, the globalization of human suffering calls us to a new imagination that affects our mission. We are all called to attention by the needs of the people of Myanmar after Cyclone Nargis, of the 2.5 million displaced by the Darfur conflict, of the suffering now in Eastern Congo, or the 130 million persons displaced within China from impoverished rural zones to the cities. It is not the tired tools of Enlightenment activism that we turn to, but rather our deep Catholic principles of solidarity, service, communion and a belief in the Spirit of God active in all people and places.

For over 20 years of service to refugees in such places as Cambodia, Rwanda, El Salvador, Bosnia, I had direct experience of these realities. In confirming the vocation of the Jesuits today, the Holy Father spoke of this intuition when he met the Jesuit fathers and brothers of our recent General Congregation in Rome last February 21: "Taking up one of the latest intuitions of Father Arrupe," he said, "your Society continues to engage in a meritorious way in the service of the refugees, who are often the poorest among the poor and need not only material help but also the deeper spiritual, human and psychological proximity especially proper to your service."

In Australia and across our globe, religious ask the same questions: How do we live in an unequal and at times unjust world? How do we best use our goods, manage our time, and capacities and our resources? Where should we invest our surplus? How can we cooperate and share resources with our brothers and sisters across our world? This question is particularly acute

even among the Provinces of one religious order that have such different levels of life style in different parts of the globe.

It would be a mistake, therefore, for religious to allow a sense of our diminishment to drive our strategic planning. Instead, we were asked some time ago – over 40 years ago in fact – to use different principles for understanding our vocations and thus for planning our lives in community and our apostolic commitments. Vatican Council II, calling religious to re-imagine ourselves, asked us to return to the Gospel, the source of all Christian life, and to the original inspiration behind our particular religious community. We were also called to adjust to the changed conditions of our time.

Vatican II called religious life the prophetic dimension of the Church. Religious, it claimed, make the life of the Church more vigorous and its work more fruitful. It may have taken some time. It may have taken a few shocks – both from falling numbers and from scandals – to stir us. But that is what is happening.

For us who live it, our life as a religious is not a statistical, historical or sociological phenomenon. It is a vocation.

To illustrate the integrity of this vocation, may I share with you the testimony of a young brother who entered religious life during the last five years while I have been Provincial of the Jesuits.

“In light of the reality of our diminishing numbers ... I do not feel hopeless. Through death comes life, and there are many aspects of the current image of Brotherhood that needs a quick death. I sincerely believe that if God has a place for this particular path, then a seed will be planted and nurtured in the hearts of those generous men who are willing to listen. By the same token, I feel a sense of urgent responsibility to promote (our) vocation in its authentic beauty. Our diminishment is owed not to the irrelevance of the path, but to its troubled history and resultant stereotyping. In a world where individuals are encouraged to reach their fullest potential and develop their gifts and talents wholly, a vocation which calls for self-abnegation and obscurity is hardly an attraction.

When I was considering consecrated life, my attraction was primarily to a path of radical discipleship. In the search for meaning and purpose in life I stumbled across the Jesuits. I was led to tears at the thought of being “a man for others” and living for “God’s greater glory”. I was deeply attracted to Ignatian Spirituality in its depth and pragmatism. After some interaction with the Melbourne Seminary, I came to recognize that mine was a call to mobility, availability and apostolic service...

I find it difficult to explain how or why I was led to follow the Brothers' path. But when I did discover its beauty, I fell in love. My conversion ultimately came as a result of conversations with other Jesuit Brothers, and much reflection on the vocation. But what was also highly influential was an experience I had in India immediately before entering the Society. I had the opportunity to volunteer in the works of some of the female religious orders operating in India. In witnessing the amazing services rendered by these Sisters, I was deeply moved. Their availability, adaptability and selflessness were expressed in a simple, even ordinary service. They were women of deep faith and commitment, who radiated a demeanour of peace and contentedness. I was led to consider this model in contrast to the Priests I saw: they would be committed to the sacramental ministry and hold roles of leadership. Their work too was important, but it was not at a grassroots level with the neediest of people. The model of discipleship presented by the Sisters touched my deepest sense of calling.

The role taken up by the Brother is not one that defines him from others, not an exclusive role for which he is elevated and praised, but a role which unites him in solidarity. A Brother is able to immerse himself easily whilst sharing an equal role with the laity. Difference here lies not in what he can do that others cannot, but in who he is, and to what he is committed.

Within a few weeks I conclude my time as Provincial in Australia and move on to another assignment. You can imagine that with such evidence of a genuine vocation taking root in our community, I move on with much hope.

Religious life is now in a desert time. In deserts, people survive. Yet survival is normally not enough for a full human life. After survival comes death. In deserts springs glorious new life. Deserts also breed prophets. Prophets can be dangerous, but thanks to them our society and our Church can be renewed.

In his poem 'Australia', A D Hope condemns:

'the ultimate men ...

Whose boast is not: "We live" but: "We survive",

But then he endorses those who hope:

"Hoping, if still from the deserts the prophets come."

We have all tried to cross the deserts of competitiveness, isolation, individualism. These drain our desire for the transcendent God who lives in all things and who inspires hope in our hearts.

Benedict XVI, in his encouraging new Encyclical, *Spe Salvi* (n.2) says:

“...the Gospel is not merely a communication of things that can be known – it is one that makes things happen and is life-changing. The dark door of time, of the future, has been thrown open. The one who has hope lives differently; the one who hopes has been granted the gift of a new life.”

As religious communities, it does not matter how few we are, how diminished we appear to be. It is our communion with one another across extraordinary cultural differences that gives us our power and our relevance.

In the Bible, we have the example of Sarah and Abraham. They received the promise that because of their faith their love would be fertile, and would give to the world a new people, a new reason for hope. Looking at their wizened bodies, they would have had no reason to hope. Yet they “hoped against hope”. They had to give up their familiar home and travel through the desert to a new land of promise inhabited by strangers. How did they react to this? The Bible says: “And Sarah laughed.”

Our recently elected Jesuit Superior General, Adolfo Nicolás, remarked, “Humour is the daily face of hope.”

The laughter of Abraham and Sarah has brought us to where we are today. Diminishing, but ready to begin again on our journey of hope.