

Sharpening Blunt Intentions:

Reflections on the Future of Religious Orders in the United States Study of 1993

Stephen Glodek, SM

Time & travel change my mind.
Their implicit courses
make choosing more complex;
I lose the single scope
small choice protects.
All choices are losses- except
for true remembrance which sharpens
blunt intention into acts,
or for false fantasy
which makes bandage of torn-up facts
to stem the haemorrhage of memory.¹

Religious congregations have been about “sharpening blunt intentions” for some time now, attempting to take the recommendations of the *Future of Religious Orders in the United States Study*² and “set free” new ways of being community and new ways of responding to mission. The FORUS study said:

The key to the future, as members represent it to us, is a complex dynamic of selfless generosity, a sensitivity to emerging human needs and an intimate relationship with God, whom they firmly believe calls them to ministry in the church and the world through religious life.³

If the choices had been only to develop greater generosity, to respond more whole heartedly to emerging human needs, and to explore more profoundly our

relationship with God, the last ten years might have been a simpler journey. But as Ponsot indicates, time and travel make choosing and its incumbent loss imminently more complex.

There have been at least three factors in my experience that have made the choosing more complex. The first complicating factor has been our hesitancy to let go of the institutions that have defined our role clarity in the past and to investigate and commit to new “institutional presences” in places and ministries where that institutional presence is more needed. A second factor that has made

Stephen Glodek, S.M. is Provincial of the Marianist Province of the United States. He has served as Provincial since 1993 and is a past president of the Conference of Major Superiors of Men.

*... our temporary
professed, novices,
and aspirants ... are
most definitely a
new generation.*

more tentative our “apostolic boldness” in recent years is the growing phenomenon of the reorganization of congregational government, especially the merger of provinces. This immense corporate task, however necessary, has diluted creative energy for new mission and ministries in our country. And thirdly, the sexual abuse crisis in our Church has challenged the fabric of vowed life and our understanding of authority. Our attempts to account, to seek forgiveness, and ensure healthy policies for formation in celibacy have been, on many fronts, consuming.

But during my daily prayer recently, my perception of all this complexity has frequently been honed to a single focus. That focus is the youngest members of the Province: our temporary professed, novices, and aspirants. They are most definitely a new generation. Their complexion, their simplicity of intention, and their ease with technology will create a new congregation. I often ask them why they have come to us. And the simplicity of their still awkward articulations of things hovers around: *you are doing something worth doing and you are doing it in a way that I can commit myself to.* My generation looks at our restructured Province and sees a patchwork quilt and understands the leadership task as continuing to sew up the seams of that quilt. Our youngest members do not see a quilt made of four pieces, but a new place. They have entered that new place, the Marianist Prov-

ince of the United States, and they see it as a vibrant place in which to stake their lives. They consistently look for concrete symbols that speak of their membership in that new place, of their commitment to work at things together, and of their common prayer life that is so much a part of their adult Catholic Marianist lives. As we begin to bring energy to the symbolization of what we have called perhaps for too long, the new Province, I begin to realize that something new really has been born here. When I lift my eyes from the corporation minutes, the personnel negotiations, the budget balancing - almost in spite of leadership, a crawling-infant-Province is struggling to take its first hesitant steps. And if I let go of the anxiety to keep the newly standing infant from falling, and watch where his steps are headed, I see the places that the FORUS study of 1993 stated US religious wanted to go.

There are many aspects of the FORUS study that merit contemplation, evaluation, and continuing study. I will reflect on only three aspects of the study: (1) releasing the founding charisma for the new age, (2) focusing the mission of the Province, and (3) responding to the challenge of multiculturalism. I construct my reflections around the framework of choices made or being made by my own Province. FORUS stated:

The resolution of the change process, however, is affected deeply by the individual and communal choices made along the way. The critical

component in the change effort is to imagine a desirable future for a congregation and reinforce that movement by consistency in choices based on the values and traditions of the particular order.⁴

Releasing the Founding Charism for a New Age

In 1989 at a joint assembly of the Leadership Conferences of both Women and Men Religious, the leaders at that time looked to the year 2010 and listed what they felt would be *transformative elements* for religious life in the United States. One of those elements envisioned that: “By the year 2010, religious groups will have reexamined, reclaimed and set free the charisms of their foundresses/founders.”

It is a monumental task for a group to go back several hundred years, to try to understand the social milieu in which the founder lived, and then to understand how and why the foundation of their order was a response to that milieu. That is the reexamining part. The reclaiming has to do with a personal and corporate recommitment to where the reexamination has led the group. After having “reexamined” our present milieu, the “setting free,” I believe, is the congregation’s response to the question of what would the Founder be asking us to be and do today. This is a formidable task that has been asked of religious by Vatican Council II

and almost all succeeding documents related to religious life in the Church. Charism is named charism by the Church community because the Founder’s inspiration brought gospel light to social darkness at a particular time in history. To understand the social darkness of our times, to read the proverbial “signs of the times,” and then, to sharpen the action focus of the group to respond is, in all senses, an act of refounding.

My own congregation was founded to provide persons who would commit themselves to forming Marian social units within the Church community. The formation and multiplication of these Marian faith communities would result in rebuilding the desecrated Church of France after the revolution. And indeed it did! The first choice made by the congregation after this initial inspiration was that an excellent and fertile milieu to accomplish the development of a faith community and its replication in the family, the Church and society in general was through education in schools. And the next 150 years is history, as they say. A graced history that has resulted in 2004 with our Province having sponsorship of three universities, 20 secondary schools, and various middle and elementary school efforts, not to mention, parishes, social service ventures and many other ministries.

For us to reclaim our charism of lay faith formation in community is not to deny or vilify our history subsequent to the Founder. It is to ask: how best

To understand the social darkness of our times, to read the proverbial “signs of the times,” and then, to sharpen the action focus of the group to respond is, in all senses, an act of refounding.

... the new energy
that we are finding
in ... rediscovery is
definitely
overflowing into an
openness to new
places and new
ventures ...

can we continue to be agents for the formation and multiplication of communities of faith now in 2004? We did not need to leave schools. They are a still much-needed ministry. We needed to reassess our presence there and redefine, in many cases, where those schools are located.

Whereas for many years we relied on the force of numbers to exert a large measure of the influence of our charism, now we are more conscious (and conscientious) about sponsorship agreements, board formation, and faculty faith development in the *characteristics of Marianist education*. We have in many senses rediscovered the reason that Marianists chose education as a particular field for forming Catholic social units that will develop apostles, who themselves will form additional communities, and so continue to rebuild our Church.

In many ways we have repositioned ourselves to understand more deeply why Marianists do school work as a fundamental expression of the original charism. But the new energy that we are finding in that rediscovery is definitely overflowing into an openness to new places and new ventures in which the Church and our society are calling us to build and multiply communities of faith.

Focusing the Mission of the Province

The FORUS study was quite clear in its unequivocal chal-

lenge in the area of mission focus:

Congregations that are vital to the church will have an explicit focus, and their effectiveness will be enhanced by the members' commitment to the collective mission...the absence of corporate commitment to embody the group's response to current unmet human needs in light of Gospel imperatives stands in contrast to the collective vision and action that marked the birth of most apostolic, monastic or contemplative congregations.⁵

The formulation of the common mission of a Province is a daunting communal task. There are deep generational differences in religious life at this point in our history.

In the chaos of years past and in the collapse of many common ministries every Province has those "who have migrated to the periphery of their congregations, often living lives that reflect significant ministerial contributions but which have little to do with their congregation or religious life."⁶ For a variety of reasons and complex variables religious congregations have sometimes "relinquished the power of corporate witness for a variety of individual commitments in effective but unconnected ministerial positions."⁷

Young men entering our congregation now often experienced in individual ministry for the Church. They are seeking *apostolic teams* with which to minister. They understand the strength and witness of religious

life today to be in community and in working as visible teams.

Asking communities to listen carefully to the unmet needs around them, to interface what they hear with both the Scriptures and the tradition of our congregation, and then, to propose actions that will carry Province endorsement and commitment is part of the process of focusing the mission of the Province. Because of the historical moment, perhaps the most difficult part of the process is prioritizing good choices. Unmet needs far outstrip the personnel and financial resources available to us. In this process local insight and commitment very much need to yield to Province insight and commitment. We stand with five loaves and two fishes and are asked to feed the five thousand. We begin distributing the loaves we have in hand and trust that God will multiply the baskets we hold in very new ways. The many baskets we held in the past distracted us from reliance on the multiplying hand of God. Now we realize that God is the real architect of any mission statement because the mission is God's, not ours. It is God who will weave together the complex generational insights and differences which make us hesitant.

Responding to the Challenges of Multiculturalism

The demographics of the United States Catholic community and the demographics of

United States religious communities have been well publicized.

To a large degree, we keep operating within the cognitive dissonance of the two statistical bases, as if we have not heard them. The challenge that FORUS posed to us again was quite unequivocal: "the reality of multiculturalism must be addressed by religious orders."⁸

Most international religious congregations in the United States trace their American roots to immigrant communities and immigrant religious. This makes our corporate hesitancy in this area all the more difficult to understand.

I believe the key to beginning to address this challenge, as a Province group, is risk. What are some of the risks that have proved successful? Having the courage to place ourselves in the midst of new peoples to our country without understanding the language at first, is a halting, but a right-direction beginning. The will of Province leadership to require a second language as an integral part of the formation process is laying the groundwork for a more whole-hearted response by the next generation of religious. Are English-speaking vocation directors willing to conduct discernment retreats with the humbling use of translators? Are we willing to integrate English as a Second Language into our formation programs? Are communities willing to integrate new cultural expressions into their prayer life and to be responsive to different iconographies of sacred images and art in order that new people

Young men entering our congregation now ... are seeking apostolic teams ...

*God knows we were
born to come to
religious life for such
a time as this.*

to feel welcomed into these communities? Attention by leadership and local communities to some of these areas of cultural expansion will open a door to change. It is my firm conviction that unless our communities become increasingly multicultural, we will have little credibility with the United States Church, except in suburban, middle class ministries.

In any corporate enthusiasm regarding multiculturalism, we tend most often to forget our responsibility to ministry with the African-American community, especially the small, fragile Catholic segment of that population. We need to confront and ask forgiveness for the corporate Church racism that makes this population even more invisible to us than those who speak a different language than ours. And we need to move closer.

Conclusion

The FORUS study was a priceless gift to religious of the United States and to our Church. There are many more challenges that they outline and I could have spoken about, but the three mentioned were chosen because dealing with them has been the beginnings of transformation for my own Province. While a new generation of religious in the United States will study FORUS as a historical document, they will live the reality of response or non-response to its challenges.

I often take great focus for my own prayer and Province leadership from the Book of Esther. The drama and multi-leveled intrigues of this magnificent story of the reluctant queen, I leave to your own remembrance and reading. When court intrigue threatens the very existence of the Jewish people in the kingdom, Queen Esther expresses her remorse that she had ever accepted this position. Her uncle, Mordecai, a court official of the King, says to her: "and who knows whether you were not born to come to the throne for such a time as this?"⁹ And we might say: God knows we were born to come to religious life for such a time as this. It is time to take all our "blunt intentions," as Marie Ponsot says, and sharpen them into action. This is our time; there won't be any other in which we are called to live religious life in the United States. We have five loaves and two fishes; let's together see how far our God will stretch them.

1 "Take Time, Take Place", Ponsot, Marie, *Springing: New and Selected Poetry*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002), pg. 191-192.

2 Nygren, David J. and Ukeritis, Miriam, D., *The Future of Religious Orders in the United States: Transformation and Commitment*, (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1993). Future references to this work will be indicated as FORUS.

3 *FORUS*, xxiii.

4 *Ibid.*, xxvi.

5 *Origins*, 22: 15, pg. 270.

6 *Ibid.*, pg. 271.

7 *Ibid.*, pg. 271.

8 *Ibid.*, pg. 264.

9 Esther 4:14