



[The following article was taken from a presentation given by Fr. Ken Himes, OFM, at a national gathering at Trinity College of the justice and peace directors of CMSM groups and the Washington JP offices, on the occasion of CMSM's 40th anniversary in 1996. It is as current today as it was when it was first given.]

Religious Men and the Ministry of Justice and Peace A Reflection on Three Decades

Introduction

There are few developments in religious life since Vatican II that have been more hopeful than the dramatic rise in justice and peace activity, a commitment to the social mission of the church. Today this ministry is more diverse in style, more widespread in locale and is more intimately connected to the ideals of religious life than would have been predicted thirty years ago. Without doubt it is a movement of grace, committed people responding to the prompting of the Holy Spirit. In the remarks which follow I will reflect upon thirty years of social ministry by the membership of CMSM. My comments can be grouped under three headings: a review of the recent past, the centrality of justice and peace ministry to the mission of the church today, and a word about the future of religious in this ministry.

Before proceeding, however, I want to offer an apology for some of my language. Throughout the talk I will be using some shorthand expressions which could be insulting and misleading if they are not explained. I will refer to America and Americans as if these are the same as the United States and being a citizen of the U.S. I realize that this can seem to slight not only Canadians and Mexicans but people of Central and South America. No offense is intended. Because this is a gathering of CMSM I will be discussing male religious when I refer to religious. Obviously, I mean no insult to the thousands of dedicated women religious who have served the Church in this country and I recognize that their experience and history will differ in a variety of ways from that of male religious. Finally, when I use the word church I will be referring to the Roman Catholic Church. Again, I do not ignore that the church embraces far more than those baptized into the Roman Catholic community. But in this case, as with the previous ones, I simply am using a shorthand designation which I hope is understandable in this setting and before this audience.

I A Thematic Review of our Recent Past

Four themes will be employed to offer an overview of issues and developments in the experience of male religious communities in the United States as they reacted to the urgency of the social ministry of the church. In this section I offer not a careful chronological reconstruction of the past thirty years but rather a personal reflection which is intended to

provoke reflection and discussion on your part. My hope is that you can recognize something of your experience or that of your confreres in what I describe.

1. Foreign Missions and the Social Mission of the Church

The foreign missionary work of religious underwent great rethinking as a result of the theologies of revelation, grace, and church that scholars produced in the fifties and sixties. After the Council there was a need to rearticulate the nature and purpose of foreign missionary activity. Not everyone was able to do that as adequately as might have been hoped for and the result was a gradual diminishment of interest in the missions by younger religious. There also occurred a return of many foreign missionaries to the States, sometimes with a sense of what came to be called "reverse mission," i.e., returning to the United States with the avowed intent of communicating a message about how Latin Americans, Asians and Africans saw us.

I think it is fair to say that those who took up the task of "reverse mission" were most commonly religious who had worked in Central and South America. Partly this was due to the tremendous influence of the U.S. in those areas and thus the "reverse mission" message was clear, and partly it was the case that the Latin American church was quicker to develop and give voice to a local theology that did not merely adopt the basic themes of Vatican II but adapted the conciliar vision to the Latin American reality. Thus missionaries returning from the church of Latin America came back to the U.S. with a perspective and orientation that was self-consciously different from the North American outlook. Throughout the sixties and seventies some of the most prominent and dedicated religious in justice and peace activities here in the States were men who had previously spent time abroad working in the foreign missions. Frequently, they were more critical of the U.S. than their fellow religious and were quicker to devote themselves to the social mission of the church as their primary ministerial activity.

The influence of foreign missionaries in the social ministry of the church has been enormous and it has provided both strengths and weaknesses to the development of justice and peace work in the American church. The "reverse mission" people were prophetic, in the sense of being able to distance themselves from the conventional wisdom of U.S. society and they were able to expose the dark side of a Catholicism which had become comfortably suburban and middle class in this country. The judgments made about the United States at times seemed harsh, even radical, but it was an important counterweight to a church that was less and less a blue-collar, urban ethnic population and more and more a white-collar, assimilated, suburban middle-class.

One of the major benefits to religious communities in particular and the U.S. church in general provided by foreign missionaries was the international awareness of Catholic justice and peace activity. Questions of economic development in poor nations, economic colonialism, the behavior of multi-national corporations, Central American politics, apartheid, the plight of refugees -- these and so many other issues came into the rec room and dining room conversations of religious communities because of the experience and awareness of foreign missionaries who knew the world was larger than the local parish, retreat house, school campus, or shrine church.

A more ambiguous aspect of the global awareness of foreign missionaries was the inclination to readily adopt the philosophical and theological categories of liberation theology. By helping to introduce this vitally important theological and pastoral movement

to the U.S. church the returning missionaries expanded the theological conversation within our nation. In the sixties and seventies many North American Catholic theologians were still far more engaged with the European theologies of Rahner, Congar, Schillebeeckx, Kung, Fransen, Fuchs and others than with the voices of Gutierrez, Segundo, Boff, Sobrino and their colleagues. Bringing back not only knowledge of new authors but sensitivity to the life-situation of the Latin American church was a wonderful service provided by those who performed "reverse mission." At the same time one of the unfortunate aspects of this influence was that many in the justice and peace community simply adopted liberation theology without sufficient reflection upon how the Latin American experience should be integrated with North American realities. As a result justice and peace ministry employed a vocabulary, a rhetorical style and a social analysis which was not fully adequate to communicate with the vast majority of U.S. Catholics whose experience of democracy, free markets, and liberal culture shaped a middle class outlook very different than the reality presumed by liberation theologians. Of course the ministry of justice and peace in this country must be shaped by a wide-ranging conversation with the church throughout the world but the conversation must also be rooted in an understanding of the dynamics of life in the United States -- our traditions, our institutions, our virtues and vices.

This leads to another aspect of the influence of foreign missionaries on justice and peace ministry, its prophetic edge. In many ways Catholic social action throughout its history in this country had tended toward reform liberalism. Now and then during the nineteenth century the immigrant communities, particularly the non-English speaking immigrants, took a more separatist attitude toward U.S. culture but for the most part American Catholics worked for incremental reform from within the dominant ethos of the nation. The most significant exception to this approach in the twentieth century has been the Catholic Worker movement. Assimilation not withdrawal, however, was the goal for most immigrant Catholics and the church in this nation worked to promote such an ambition. Much was accomplished as a result, not only by the average Catholic in this country, but also by Catholic intellectuals and church leaders who were critical though not radically so in their acceptance of the way of life found in the United States. One need only think of names like John Carroll, John Ireland, Isaac Hecker, James Gibbons, Peter Dietz, John Ryan, and John Courtney Murray to remember that the prevailing trend in Catholic social activism was to see the possibility rather than incompatibility in putting the two words American and Catholic together.

Returning missionaries, however, looked at their homeland from a perspective of somewhat, at least, the outsider. Influenced by their pastoral situation and by the theology of liberation the analysis that such missionaries offered was more harsh and radical than many U.S. Catholics had previously considered. Aligning themselves with the voices of Dorothy Day, Thomas Merton and those Catholics who had become alienated by the war with Vietnam an important segment of the justice and peace community adopted a strongly counter-cultural stance toward the United States. But the majority of American Catholics never embraced the more radical critics of society like James Groppi, Dan and Phil Berrigan or Merton. This was so, I believe, not because of a lack of virtue or a shallow faith on the part of the majority but because their experience was different. For many Catholics, American society, with all its problems, was not simply lacking in structures of grace. Justice and peace ministries which assumed an over-emphasis on counter-cultural strategies did not capture the full experience of those Catholics who found in this society elements of God's gracious presence as well as human sinfulness. What this led to, though not deliberately, was a certain elitism in justice and peace ministry which tended to belittle the

middle-class Catholic and his or her alleged vices of consumerism, racism, nationalism, and parochialism.

No doubt the prophetic or counter-cultural element of justice and peace ministry did shake the taken-for-granted world of many Catholics in this country. While never indifferent to the situation of other nations or peoples, U.S. Catholics were challenged by those in reverse mission and other harsh critics of our society to consider the ways in which the United States was complicit in the suffering felt by so many on our planet. There was a salutary call to conscience which provoked some anger but also much soul-searching among faithful people and helped prevent American Catholics from becoming too uncritical in their assimilation. In addition, many missionaries returning from poor countries came home with a renewed appreciation for simple living. Living in countries where material conditions were harsher than the United States allowed foreign missionaries to rethink the distinction between being and having, between what is truly necessary and what is luxury. Their example of simple living inspired many fellow religious and lay persons to link lifestyle issues with political commitments and to rediscover the social implications of asceticism so as to connect self-discipline with social solidarity.

2. Spirituality and Justice and Peace Ministry

Not only in the area of asceticism but in the broad range of sub-topics that fall under the general heading of spirituality there has been an important connection made between justice and peace ministry and spirituality. One of the early struggles in social ministry was coming to terms with the frustration which accompanied the work. Small victories and large setbacks, the complexity of the existing problems along with the appearance of new ones, time passing and social conditions worsening -- many religious discovered that justice and peace ministry had a high risk factor of fatigue, anger, alienation, and marginalization. Classmates might rejoice in being made pastors of successful parishes, others in the community achieved notoriety in teaching or administering schools, successful preachers and counselors developed loyal followers among the Catholic laity but often those religious working in justice and peace ministry were on the margins of a congregation's ministerial life.

Out of necessity as much as desire those religious engaged in the social mission of the church took up the search for a spirituality which would support their ministry. To a great extent this has led to marvelous advances in the spiritual journeys of countless religious. Yet it has been a struggle to move from a spirituality that stressed renunciation of the world to a spirituality which is more at home in the world. Some were not able to make the transition and justice and peace ministry has had its share of religious who no longer were able to continue in their vows, as well as those religious who took up the call to engage in social ministry but who were unable to persevere in a field of work which could be so taxing and unrewarding. Given the tumultuous times in which we have lived these last thirty years the development of a socially-conscious spirituality was a crucial factor in maintaining the faith, hope and charity which support justice and peace ministry. Forging such a spirituality, however, often required moving beyond established ways of thinking about the spiritual life and rediscovering the richness that was to be found in the Biblical tradition.

Today more and more of our confreres have found a God of the Bible who is more passionate and engaged by human history than the God of the philosophers whose qualities of omniscience and omnipotence might seem awesome but not always lovable. Coming to understand how the covenant with Yahweh and the reign of God proclaimed by Jesus were

inextricably tied to building communities of justice, mercy, peace and love has fostered a biblical spirituality that is vastly different in its foundations and emphases than that which many religious received in their novitiates during the forties and fifties. Beginning with John XXIII's optimism about the world and then articulated in the documents of the Council an outline of a spirituality emerged which was more incarnational and personalistic. No longer was the image of the holy religious one who fled the world and strove to be angelic for now holiness was to be found in the world as we became more not less human through the spiritualities we embraced.

In many communities it seems that those engaged in social ministry are also those who have taken the call to holiness most seriously. Frequently the social activists in the congregation are keenly interested in living in intentional communities with regular times of communal prayer. Retreats, directed and preached, have in recent years concentrated on topics like faith and justice, living the Gospel in an affluent culture, seeking God in everyday activities, a spirituality of peacemaking and similarly related themes. More and more religious are interested in how to preach on topics of justice and peace. Since the late eighties the reawakening of interest in the environment has added another rich strain to spirituality, with growing appreciation for how the beauty of creation becomes a revelation of God. Reverence for creation is another important path to reverence for God. Over the last thirty years, relating the social mission of the church to one's personal search for God has occasioned significant writing and any number of books and articles take as their starting point today that the journey inward and the journey outward are not separate and conflicting moments in human life but deeply intertwined. Religious today are much better able to integrate their desire for God with their quest for a more just, peaceful and sustainable world.

3. The Role of Religious and the Role of the Laity

When religious took up the challenge of renewal following Vatican II there was an energy and air of excitement as people began to see the possibilities of new ministries and new ways of serving in old ministries. The call to read the signs of the times led religious to seek out new forms of service in areas of social work, political activism, and community organizing. Encouraged by documents like the 1971 Synod's statement on *Justice in the World* and Paul VI's *Call to Action* religious involved in justice and peace ministry saw themselves as being faithful to the Council's vision of the relationship of church and world.

Among the positive consequences of such a development was the public witness of many religious to the church's commitment to building a more just and peaceful world. As vowed religious gave generously of themselves in service to the social mission of the Catholic community they constituted a living rebuttal to those who saw religion as a retreat from the world and a shirking of responsibility to care for the political, economic and cultural dimensions of human existence. The presence of religious in many roles previously viewed as "worldly" occasioned a re-evaluation of the way we had distinguished between sacred and secular and provided new appreciation for the religious depth of activity that heretofore had been seen as simply secular.

In addition, one of the greatest benefits of this outward thrust in mission beyond the institutional boundaries of the church to the wider society was that it led religious into much greater collaboration with the laity. It is obviously unfair to see the pre-Vatican II church as having no collaboration with the laity. Even in the heyday of vocations it was hardly possible to run the large Catholic network of social welfare programs, schools and

hospitals without working partnerships between religious and lay persons. Yet it is true that during the last three decades there has been increased contact between religious and lay, more egalitarian styles of shared ministry, and a sharpening of skills in collaborative approaches to ministry.

At the same time, however, we have experienced a period in which there has been a subtle but, I think, real temptation for religious to assume leadership in areas where lay persons might be expected to come to the fore. In the Council document on the role of the laity there was a clear presumption and encouragement for lay persons to be the carriers of the Gospel into the arena of public life. Both in terms of sheer numbers and in terms of experience it is the laity who will be best suited to be the leaven in the fields of business, politics, the arts, education, social service and other such fields of endeavor. To an extent this has, in fact, been the case. But when we consider the proliferation of justice and peace centers, newsletters, programs and activities sponsored by religious communities over the years it suggests that just as the church began to seriously engage the wider world many religious took the lead in doing so. In one way, this reflects well upon the tremendous dedication and creativity of vowed religious in this country but in another sense it can be construed as religious moving into a realm of ministry that was expanding and for which lay persons should have provided the obvious cadre of leaders.

A consequence of the high profile of religious in the justice and peace work of the church is related to my earlier point concerning the more radical and elitist aspects of the ministry. Religious, as outsiders to much of the workings of secular society and as people expected to have less concerns about career, salary, financial well-being, and responsibilities to family could afford to be more harsh in their judgments about the workings of secular institutions. Many lay persons were more attuned to the ambiguity of the business world and less prone than religious to make broad prophetic denunciations of the profit motive, economic competition or material success. It may be a generalization but there is a measure of truth in the claim that during the last thirty years many religious in justice and peace ministry were considerably more critical of American society than their parents, siblings, nephews or nieces who made up the Catholic laity. As a result, the description of the problems and suggested solutions did not engage lay persons the way they did religious. As justice and peace ministry draws upon the experience of lay persons we may witness a different tone and style in the way in which it is exercised when compared to how the ministry might look if religious were the leaders of such a ministry.

4. Parochial Ministry and the Charism of Religious

Perhaps no development in contemporary religious life has been more important than the response to the Council's affirmation that "institutes have their own proper characters and functions." Thus, "the spirit and aim of each founder should be faithfully accepted and retained in the renewal efforts of religious (*Perfectae Caritatis*, par. 2). The past thirty years have seen an onslaught of historical research, publication and discussion by and for religious communities trying to ascertain the meaning of their charism as embodied in the lives of founders and their writings.

Is there any religious institute today that does not work more self-consciously than a few decades ago at understanding and passing on its charism? Less and less is it valid to talk about religious in a generic sense for the distinctive charisms of monastic, mendicant, and apostolic communities, to suggest just three ways of describing religious, can not be lumped

together. And diversity is the case even within these categories as Carmelites, Dominicans and Franciscans would attest when discussing mendicant communities.

One of the things that this rediscovery of the charism of a religious community occasioned was a rethinking of the idea of religious priesthood. The Jesuit historian John O'Malley has suggested that the theology of priesthood widely held after the Council was inadequate to the complexity of the tradition of religious life within the church (*Tradition and Transition*, ch. 6). Many commentators on Vatican II have noted that the Council talked about Christ in the classical three-fold schema: priest, prophet and king. These last two images expanded the identity of the priest beyond a narrow cultic understanding to retrieve the place of ministry of the word and pastoral leadership for the ordained minister's identity. So far so good but, as O'Malley suggests, this is still too narrow a view.

The teaching of Vatican II rests on an assumption about the unity of the priesthood that is not historically accurate. When *Presbyterorum Ordinis* talks about priesthood there is an image of ministry 1) in a stable community of faith and practice, 2) ordinarily exercised in a parish setting, and 3) done by those in hierarchical union with bishops. What the document paints, in other words, is a portrait of diocesan priesthood as if this is the norm while other modes of priestly ministry are simply variations on a theme. Given that at the time of the Council approximately one-third of all the ordained ministers in the church were religious this was a large unfounded assumption. A consequence of this is that *Perfectae Caritatis* treats religious profession as an issue of lifestyle--discussing spirituality, vows, discipline but ignoring ministry.

Of late, religious men have experienced a growing disenchantment with the relegation of their religious vocation to a lifestyle question. And so they have begun discussing what is the formative influence on ministry offered by their particular charism. It has become apparent that the Vatican II approach is insufficient to account for the experience of thousands of ordained religious. The founders of religious communities were charismatic fellows whose ministry flowed not from office but from their reading of the pastoral need and a sense of personal inspiration. Often such ministry was exempt from direct episcopal supervision and beyond diocesan structures and boundaries. For example, in many religious institutes it was the various ministries of the Word: preaching, teaching, lecturing, spiritual direction, directing retreats, publishing books, ministering to non-Catholics as well as the faithful, which were the normal ministries for religious priests. In many cases this took ordained religious beyond the walls of the church and even of Christian society. Priestly ministry for religious is broad as it takes forms of pastoral care that are devised to meet the spiritual needs of people, needs which can appear marginal to the ordinary pastoral tasks of leading a parochial community. For that very reason a variety of religious communities have never seen that caring for parishes was central to their work.

Thus, for many ordained religious the typical site of ministry is not a parochial setting but a mission territory, a classroom, a retreat house, an outreach center in our cities. In short, the model is not that of preaching to a largely stable community of believers but of spreading the Gospel through a number of occupations and tasks that make contact with people who are beyond the reach of the parochial structures of a diocese. Members of CMSM have been warned before of the pitfall that religious allow their ministry to be defined by the needs of a diocese as assessed by the bishop.

As we all know there is a personnel crisis before the church whereby we are unable to

provide adequate ordained ministers for parishes throughout the nation. Religious should not permit themselves to become stopgaps in addressing the crisis but continue to offer their own pastoral assessment of how to serve the people of God consistent with their charism. This may require less not more parochial involvement. For religious the social mission of the church may well be one of the most important aspects of ministry to which we should attend and one which may receive less and less attention from the secular clergy as they find themselves thinly stretched to meet the needs of American Catholicism's extensive parochial structures.

As religious have struggled with their identity during these last thirty years there has been a gradual realization that the charism of religious life may lead people in directions quite different than those pursued with dedication by those ordained to serve in a local presbyterate. Am I a religious first or a priest is a bad question. The proper question is not which comes first but of how ministry and religious life mutually interpenetrate and shape one another. A religious finds that his religious vocation brings a specific coloring or inflection to the way one ministers as an ordained person.

If what has been said is true for ordained religious it should clearly be the case for lay religious. Reconsidering institutional commitments has often been painful and even divisive. Just as ordained religious have at times taken their cue more from the local diocese than from their community's tradition and charism so, too, have lay religious. In some instances, the staffing of diocesan schools has served in an analogous way to the staffing of diocesan parishes. Working through the issues of corporate institutional commitment and the charism of a community can seem to be a minefield and the movement of religious into justice and peace ministries and out of other ministries has often been the occasion for a minor explosion. Yet, the process of renewal continues and interest in the social mission of the church on the part of religious has been encouraged by an appreciation of our respective charisms.

II The Centrality of the Social Mission

Let me turn now in a more brief manner to my second and third headings, the centrality of the church's social mission and a vision for the future of justice and peace ministry. A striking feature of the history of the social mission of the church was that it was seen as an extension of the church's life but not always as essential to its nature. One of the great contributions to the church's social ministry has been the theological reflection beginning with *Gaudium et Spes* and continuing in later documents such as *Justitia in Mundo* and *Evangelii Nuntiandi* on how to connect justice and peace ministry to the religious mission of the church. That essential religious mission has been expressed in our time as the task of evangelization. It is evangelization which "is in fact the grace and vocation proper to the church, her deepest identity" (*Evangelii Nuntiandi*, par. 14). As Paul VI explained, evangelization is a process, a vital part of which is entrance into community. People simply cannot be preached at or lectured to on Catholic doctrine, they must be brought into a community of faith. The entrance into community is a necessary part of the conversion experience.

But what kind of community? One that has a distinct pattern of behavior, a way of life. In its earliest years Christianity was known as "The Way," because it was seen to be about living a certain way of life, becoming part of a particular community. The Gospel cannot be merely a matter of words and ideas, it must be good news proclaimed so as to affect the way people

live. It must be a transforming word. If we are to be evangelizers we must bring people into community. But it must be a community that has an identifiable way of life. In other words, faith entails not only attitudes or ideas but commitments. Put another way, the community that is Christian must be a community of witnesses. Without that element the process of evangelization fails.

To what does the community witness? To what is the community committed? The answer is that we are to witness to the very thing that Jesus was committed to -- the reign of God. In Mark 1,15 we read the verse: "This is the time of fulfillment. The reign of God is at hand; reform your lives and believe in the Gospel." This passage is what exegetes call a summary verse, that is, it is Mark's way of capsulizing the message of Jesus during his public ministry. The message of good news was the Lord's proclamation of the reign of God. This was the central theme of his public preaching, the reign of God was at hand. However, it is not enough to have the Gospel message. A basic rule of public speaking is to "know your audience." Ministry cannot be a matter of "here's your answer and, by the way, what was your question?" If the community of witnesses, namely the church, is to effectively minister we must attend to the concerns of people and show how faith in Jesus speaks to the issues of moment in our world.

Years ago the old *Critic* magazine had a cartoon which speaks to the point. There was this handsome, sharply dressed cleric standing before a woman in her living room. The lady had a house dress on, hair curlers tumbling over her forehead and ears, she was impressively pregnant; there were two children tugging on the bottom of the tattered frock she was wearing; her husband in a tee-shirt was lying belly-up on the sofa, surrounded by beer cans; the laundry was piled in the corner and the pots were boiling over on the stove in the background; the dog was chasing the cat around the small apartment. The smiling priest is looking down on her weary face and saying: "Now remember Agnes, the Christian is an Alleluia from head to toe!"

Why does the cartoon cause a chuckle? Not because it is untrue but because it is incongruous. None of us will deny that faith should be a reason for genuine joy. But the way the "good news" was conveyed left the woman unmoved and us bemused. Why? Because it was a message untouched by the human situation. This is a perennial danger of religious language, that we will use it cheaply; that is, without making the effort to translate it into a meaningful message for people in their concrete situation. If we are to avoid sounding like the well-meaning but laughable figure in the cartoon we must speak to the needs, the hopes, the yearnings of real people in their actual lived experience.

Gustavo Gutierrez puts the challenge more graphically: "How are we to preach the gospel with any credibility to that two-thirds of humanity which goes to bed each night hungry, ill-housed, chronically ill and without hope for the political and material improvement of their lives? What can the phrase 'God is love' or 'redemption from the yoke of sin' possibly mean to them?" Do we run the risk of being like that cleric in the *Critic* cartoon? Simply put our preaching must be accompanied by action. It is not enough to tell the good news while people are enveloped in conditions that deny the very dignity we tell them is theirs.

Now if I were teaching a course in English grammar and a student handed in a paper with the phrase, "the guests are here, not yet," it would be marked a failure. But as a teacher of theology when students say, "the reign of God is here, not yet," I remark upon their wisdom, their grace, their ability to think like me! Jesus preached the reign of God. It was a reign

which he understood himself to be initiating through his ministry. Jesus understood the reign of God to be breaking into history through his life and he invited listeners to respond appropriately to that fact. There is a here and now dimension to the reign of God for Jesus.

Yet, just as surely we realize that the reign of God is not here in all its fullness. The reign of God may have begun its epiphany in Jesus but most of us are sensitive to the reality of the incompleteness of the reign of God in our world. As Woody Allen once put it: "the lion may lie down with the lamb; but the lamb isn't going to get much sleep!" So we find ourselves in a state of tension, we live in the between times. The reign of God is here, not yet. While refusing to be carried away by naive optimism or mindless joy since the reign of God is not yet, we still should not lapse into the other fault of ignoring the here and now quality of the reign of God. If the reign of God is here as well as not yet then the reign of God is linked to history. Like Jesus the reign must be incarnated and enter into the human drama.

Without delving into an elaborate biblical exegesis I think it is fair to claim that the reign of God is a state of existence that is marked by just, peaceful, loving relationships. When Jesus sought to announce his ministry Luke tells us he read from the prophet Isaiah in the synagogue. There he told his audience that the blind will see, the lame walk, prisoners will be freed, the poor will hear the good news. In Matthew 25, the judgment of God is based on how one treats the neighbor - the hungry, thirsty, imprisoned, homeless neighbor. The reign of God is a relational term, it is the experience of being in covenant with God and God's people. Jesus invites us to have the same relationship with God that he has -- to be a son or daughter of the Father. And this implies being a brother or sister to one another. Being a brother or sister must mean something for our conduct toward others or it is a pious non-reality.

The church in order for it to be faithful to Christ must witness to both the here and not yet dimensions of the reign of God. My concern in these remarks is the here and now dimension. For the church to be like its Lord the community of Christians must be the agent of the reign of God. The church, like Jesus, has the earthly task of incarnating in history the reign of God; which is a state of life marked by relationships which are characterized by justice, peace, forgiveness, love. In sum, the task of the church is to bring about liberation. Now that is a term that can be misunderstood and even rejected out of hand. Liberation, as properly understood in Catholic theology, is similar to the way we use the classical word "salvation" but liberation has a less otherworldly connotation than salvation. It underscores the here and now aspect of God's reign. The word liberation calls attention to the present processes whereby people begin to be extricated from sin and its effects -- oppression, violence, sexism, marginalization, racism. We must be clear that liberation does not presume an uncritical commitment to a specific economic or political option as the only legitimate strategy. What it does imply is a pledge to work for the overcoming of obstacles to human well-being. Liberation recalls the freedom Christ has won for all. But that liberation, it must be remembered, cannot be thought of as simply a spiritual event, for as embodied spirits the liberation Christ has won should be experienced in the realms of temporal life. Liberation, or salvation if you prefer, must mean something for our lives here and now.

So if the church is to proclaim the reign of God, if we as religious men are to invite people into a relationship with God, we should be willing to assist people in developing a way of life where they have some foretaste, some here and now experience of the fruits of God's reign. We should as a church be able to point to how their relationship with God transforms their

life, or at least calls for that transformation. Otherwise we are reduced to promising a reign of God that is only not yet, without the element of here and now. As the Synod of 1971 said, "Unless the Christian message of love and justice shows its effectiveness through action in the cause of justice in the world it will only with great difficulty gain credibility" (chapter 2). If we are committed to the great religious mission of the church, to evangelize our world by proclamation of the good news of Jesus Christ, then we must also be committed to witnessing by our actions that the good news of God's reign touches the actual experience of people's economic, political and social existence.

During these past thirty years the social mission of the church has moved from the periphery of church life to the center. In the majority of religious communities it is no longer necessary to make the intellectual case that justice and peace ministry is valid and important. No longer do religious who are social activists regularly encounter opposition or skepticism from their colleagues. In fact such individuals are now esteemed for their ministry and serve as a point of pride for others in the community. But the number of religious who wish to follow in the steps of earlier justice and peace ministers is small. Within congregations, although the mood seems to have shifted from disagreement to approval, the support is from a distance as religious who work full-time in social ministries remain a small percentage of a religious congregation's personnel. As David Nygren and Miriam Ukeritis conclude in their study of American religious life, many religious do not see themselves as personally engaged by or particularly interested in doing justice and peace ministry ("Future of Religious Orders in the United States," *Origins* 22, p. 264).

At present the great need is not to convince people of the value of social ministry but to provide opportunities to acquire the skills to do it well. Religious may now see the point of contact between faith and justice but they do not know the point of entry for bringing this insight to practical expression in concrete pastoral tasks. How to organize direct service programs and how to move from direct service to advocacy? How to integrate global issues of poverty, refugees, war, ethnic strife into a local ministry? How to do a social analysis of one's ministry and utilize such analysis in pastoral planning? What strategies should be followed to direct and shape the major institutions of a society? How to exercise leadership in a pluralistic and secular society? It is questions like these and the uncertainty in how to answer them that prevent many religious from acting on sentiments and values which have created an openness to justice and peace ministry even if not passionate enthusiasm. In effect, there is now a certain passive endorsement of the social mission of the church by the majority of religious but the strategies necessary to get religious to move from passivity to active ministry are not clear. The "why" of justice and peace ministry has largely been answered, what is lacking in so many cases is the practical "how to." The knowledge and skills for successful social ministry remain to be acquired and continuing education in this area is very much needed.

III Looking to the Future

Guessing at the future is always hazardous. As a stock market analyst said about economic forecasts, "the basic rule is give'em a number or give'em a date but never give'em a number and a date!" There is no ambition on my part to join the long list of people whose predictions have been reduced to humor by the passing of time. What I will simply propose for the sake of discussion is a way to think about our situation as American male religious concerned for the ongoing vitality of the social mission of the church.

One of the interesting qualities of the time in which we live is that we seem unable to name it. The best that people are able to come up with is that we are now in the age of post-modernity, which of course is only to say that we sense the passing of one era called “modernity” while all we can say about the new era is that it comes after the previous one. In political life we see something of same thing, we live in a post-Cold War world, nations in central and eastern Europe are described as post-communist. We in the U.S. appear headed for the post-welfare state with our post-industrial economy. When so many are reluctant or unable to name our situation it should not be a surprise that we religious are struggling to ascertain our future in the postconciliar church.

First, we need to remind ourselves that the Spirit of God does not work by our clock or even our calendar. Other generations have been confused and had to stumble around in history before finding a pathway. Communities of faith need only recall the situation of the Jewish people after the Exodus, or during the exile. Consider the plight of early Jewish Christians trying to make sense of their people’s rejection of Jesus and then the church’s decision to accept Gentiles as equal partners. We can only imagine what turmoil must have been introduced with the fall of Rome or the rise of Islam in North Africa, once the most vigorous of Christian regions. Compared to these things the uncertainties of religious life in the nineties appear less than overwhelming.

There is always the temptation in times of turmoil to rush to find a solution, to come up with the answer to our searching. As religious we may too quickly seek to formulate a strategy for action before we properly define our goals or understand the nature of the obstacles to those goals. But, of this I am convinced, in the future there will be few things more needed to advance the social mission of the church than the quiet determination and perseverance of religious who keep working on issues of justice, peace and environment even if no grand vision or strategy is easily forthcoming.

Others may reap the benefits of the seeds planted during this time. I remember the scene from Robert Bolt’s *A Man for All Seasons* when the ambitious Richard Rich is disappointed that Sir Thomas More has suggested to him that he should be a teacher. Recall that Rich somewhat bitterly asks of More, “And if I was, who would know it?” To which More replies, “You, your pupils, your friends, God. Not a bad public, that.” It is precisely that kind of attitude which is needed by religious today as they work for justice and peace. To quietly and faithfully work at seemingly limited and modest tasks with an awareness both of God’s presence and the witness that can be given to others.

To my mind one of the great problems before us is our tendency to forget the absolute necessity to care for what is near at hand, those local and people-sized institutions which provide a sense of community in the wider society. In this country there is a real need to strengthen the institutions and relationships of civil society. Civil society has been described as the many forms of community and association which are not political in form: families, neighborhoods, voluntary associations of innumerable kinds, labor unions, small businesses, and religious communities. The fate of these will determine the future of American life and place limits on what politics can do to remedy the situation since government can reinforce and strengthen the institutions of civil society but it cannot substitute for them.

According to Catholic social teaching, in any good society there must be a healthy, robust

civic sector -- a public space where human communities can flourish. Today the ecology of our social environment is as threatened as our natural environment. Our sense of community is strained. Is it possible that religious men, people who have a wealth of experience, knowledge and skill in building and sustaining community life might have something to offer the wider society in this regard? Can religious men be among those who help to repair the frayed fabric of our families, our neighborhoods, our civic groups, our voluntary associations?

Such an approach may be dismissed as corny and sentimental by the national elites for such concerns can seem small time. But that is one more aspect of the problem. The worlds of big business and national politics have de-legitimated local life. The world of voluntary associations and community organizations seems peripheral to the market and government where the talk is of billions of dollars, and millions of people and what's more, the talk takes place on television. The mega-structures of politics and business have led us to discount the spiritual, the cultural, the social at the local level. Yet it is upon these things, the structures of civic life, that society rests. Now the lesson is not to ignore the larger world of national government and business but to see that these realms support and enable the local not undermine it.

Nothing which goes on at the national levels of politics or economics will improve our social life if at the local level people continue to withdraw from public space, avoid contact with neighbors, refuse to participate in those social groupings which constitute our civil society. Is it unrealistic to ask of ourselves as religious that we counter this trend and become men who become active participants in community organizations and groups at the local level? Can we model for others the way that life together is so much richer than a life lived apart? Is not the witness of our commitment to making communities work one of the most needed correctives to the present state of American life?

As vowed religious we need to be on watch for the tendency to look inward and care primarily for ourselves as we age, shrink in numbers, and worry over our collective future. What is the mood at our chapters, assemblies, interprovincial meetings? Are we anxious, troubled, lamenting a past that is forever gone? Precisely because of the natural inclination to do that, what is required is a clear outward thrust in our ministry. For those religious who have lived through the last three decades there were any number of issues which prompted us to look beyond ourselves. There was the Vietnam war and the struggle to attain civil rights for African-Americans. Then there was Central America and the desire for nuclear disarmament. Environmental consciousness developed as did the growing concern about economic inequality in our nation and the world. Many rallied around the call for promoting a consistent ethic of life, and more recently the plight of children where family structures are breaking down and poverty remains intractable. The roster of problems can be added to but the point is that rather than being simply an ad hoc list of causes which held our attention the list is a reminder that justice and peace ministry has provided a salutary service to vowed religious. It has helped us avoid the pitfall of letting our world become too small, of letting the intra-ecclesial problems of renewal define us.

The movement for justice and peace among religious these past thirty years has kept before our eyes a sense of the Gospel, a yearning for the reign of God, a not always gentle reminder that a wider world awaits whatever humble service we can render it. The social mission of the church helps religious men to be credible when we proclaim the words of the Council's *Pastoral Constitution* that "The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the people

of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ” (par. 1).

Kenneth R. Himes, OFM
August 11, 1996

[Kenneth R. Himes, OFM, is presently chair of the Department of Theology at Boston College. When this talk was originally given, he was on the faculty of the Washington Theological Union.]