



Opening a New Window: Fifteen Years after the FORUS Study

More than fifteen years ago, Miriam Ukeritis CSJ and David Nygren CM published their groundbreaking study, *The Future of Religious Orders in the United States*.¹ In it they predicted that religious congregations had only a ten-year window of opportunity before the aging of their current members and the lack of new entrants would render them nonviable. Many resisted this prediction, refusing to believe it. Some spun visions of an alternate (and sociologically naïve) future in which religious congregations would expand to include married and single, vowed and nonvowed, Catholic and non-Catholic, male and female, all somehow gathered together under the aegis of a vaguely defined charism.² Others, not knowing what to believe, considered religious life's future

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something they could do little about and focused their diminishing energies on their ministries instead.

Fifteen years later, for many religious congregations, the window of opportunity appears to have closed. Few if any of their members are under the age of sixty; no one has entered for ten or even twenty years; vocation directors are burned out or depressed. Many members covertly believe—and some openly argue—that it is useless and unethical to invite young people to enter. It is for these congregations, especially, that I am writing this article, but I offer it as well to communities which are in less dire straits. I believe that both could profit from the following alternative.

I would like to point out a different—and more sociologically feasible—path for the future of declining religious congregations. I do not see this as replacing traditional religious life—which is thriving on a smaller scale in some (but not all) of the CMSWR congregations in the United States, and on a larger scale in Africa and South Asia. There will always be a place in the church for the traditional model of religious life. *But U.S. Catholic culture is no longer as hospitable to this model as it once was.* If it were, several hundred, not a few dozen, traditional religious congregations would be springing up in this country, and they would be doubling in membership every decade. Such explosive growth was the norm for religious congregations founded in the 19th century, and it obviously is not happening today. This comparative lack of interest, however, does *not* indicate that present-day U.S. Catholics are unspiritual heathens. They simply are not attracted to the traditional model.

I believe that American Catholicism would be better served if several other versions of religious life were also available to young Catholics. By “other versions” I



do not mean the lifestyles currently being modeled by most of the non-CMSWR religious congregations. These are faring even worse than the traditionalist orders in attracting new members. Their charisms are still beautiful and, for the most part, still valid in today's world. But they are not being presented in a form that appeals to young Catholics today.

Instead, I want to suggest a different strategy for handing on a congregation's charism to a new generation: *starting one—or preferably several—social-movement organizations*. To explain how this would work, I first need

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to define a few terms. Broadly considered, a *social movement* is a wave of beliefs and/or actions that sweeps large numbers of persons into working toward a specific goal. Examples are the civil-rights movement, the women's movement, the environmental movement, and the right-to-life movement. Each of these movements may contain dozens of separate *social-movement organizations* (SMOs) which focus on particular

activities, particular groups of people, or particular issues related to the larger movement's goals. Thus, the environmental movement includes large organizations like the Sierra Club, the Nature Conservancy, and Greenpeace and also many smaller groups that focus on saving the monarch butterfly, cleaning up a local river, opposing the dumping of toxic waste, and so forth.³

There have been *religious* social movements and, thus, religious social-movement organizations as well. In

Protestantism, a succession of social movements called "Great Awakenings" sparked a host of religious revival groups throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, several of which developed into full-fledged denominations such as the Mormons, the Seventh-Day Adventists, and the various Pentecostal churches. In Catholicism, waves of devotionism swept through both 17th-century France and 19th-century North America,⁴ spinning off pilgrimage societies, sodalities, and prayer groups devoted to particular saints, scapulars, or novenas. These were not religious orders at their inception, but some later did develop in that direction. Other times they simply strengthened the existing orders.

I am suggesting that religious congregations consciously try to foster something similar today. Most still have one or more members who are passionate about meeting some particular need in today's world, be it saving the environment, feeding the poor, sheltering homeless women and children, providing free medical care to the uninsured, or mentoring the spiritually searching.⁵ Many of these members have already worked out a more or less specific theology to ground their activities and to explain how their passion fits with the congregation's charism. Some have recruited a corps of volunteers to help them in their work. To paraphrase the famous line from Molière,⁶ they are already "forming a religious SMO without knowing it." However, these passionate members are often less connected to the rest of the congregation. For years, even decades, the other members may have left them alone to "do their own thing."

But it is only a small step from what these individual religious are already instinctively doing, for their congregation deliberately to form and maintain several SMOs to enliven its charism for subsequent genera-



tions. All that remains is to help each incipient group to articulate its identity publicly, to specify clearly its religious grounding in the congregation's charism, and to take specific steps to ensure its leadership continuity and stable membership. This might simply involve:

- Picking a name connected with both the charism of the congregation and the specific focus of the group: "Vincentian Servants of the Homeless," "Franciscan Brothers and Sisters of the Earth," "Centering Prayers," and so forth.
- Adopting an identifiable sign of group affiliation, for example, a common T-shirt or a medal.
- Maintaining a public-relations effort to inform potential volunteers, donors, other members of the congregation, and the church at large about the group's existence and to attract them to its mission.
- Spelling out the criteria for entering and exiting the group, expectations of membership, and ongoing group governance. Previous evidence indicates that, paradoxically, groups with more rigorous expectations are more likely to succeed than those which demand less of their adherents.⁷

The first two steps are relatively simple, and may already have been taken. But they are not enough. Unless some provision is made for the continuance of the SMO, it may not survive its founder's retirement. The founding brother or sister may be neither interested in nor skilled at such bureaucratic maintenance activities. For the remaining steps, therefore, a religious congregation may be able to offer valuable help from its communications office (for the third task), and its leadership (for the fourth).

The kind of social-movement organization I am advocating may or may not be represented by a con-

gregation's associate program. A congregation's associates could certainly be this kind of group—but only if they are organized around a readily articulated spiritual focus and/or apostolic activity that distinguishes associate membership from the larger call given to any Catholic. Simply stating that associates are devoted to "living the charism of the founder" is not enough. The more focused the associates' commitment—whether in monthly or weekly prayer/lectio according to the founder's spirituality, or in working on a regular basis with the vowed members in their ministry, or in staffing some auxiliary ministry that complements that of the vowed members—the more my SMO proposal here can be applied to them. Otherwise, an associate program will not be sufficiently distinct from the lifestyle of non-associates to en flesh the order's charism on its own.

Advantages of the SMO Model

I am suggesting that some congregations—especially those whose members have tacitly abandoned the hope of attracting new vowed members—make a point of acknowledging this and then start to recruit people for their present members' particular SMOs. What would be the advantages of such a strategy? First of all, *any given religious congregation will survive only to the extent that its members are passionately devoted to some particular version of their founding charism.* The future of religious life does not rest with the tired or apathetic, but after a long period of decline many religious now are both. Most congregations have only a few members with the needed passion and enthusiasm. Moreover, these members may not all be focused on the *same* passion. Some may live and breathe God's call to serve the poor; others may devote their energies to preserving God's



creation through environmental activities; still others, with a more contemplative bent, may foster spirituality through centering prayer, pastoral counseling, or religious art or music.

A religious order faced with only a handful of healthy and passionate vowed members, each deeply devoted to a different passion, faces a serious dilemma. It can either focus on one of these passions to the exclu-

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sion of the others (which would be profoundly alienating to those left out), or it can try to include all of them (which dilutes the congregation's specific identity and its ability to rally its members around a common

goal). Either way, a congregation's ability to recruit to vowed membership is weakened if its remaining passionate members are devoted to different articulations of its charism, because its overall corporate mission identity will be weak.⁸

In contrast, en fleshing these articulations in several different SMOs would *strengthen* a congregation and improve the chances for its charism to survive. Since each SMO's participants are not necessarily vowed to the congregation, it is not only possible but desirable that several could exist under the same congregational "roof."⁹ The more different SMOs a congregation's members "spin off," the greater the chance that one, at

least, will catch fire. As I will argue below, this may then become the seed for the congregation's future.

A second advantage of the SMO approach is that it is a sociologically feasible way of incorporating temporary members or inviting specific demographic groups into the congregation's family. The prospect of temporary membership in permanently vowed religious congregations has been discussed for over thirty years without ever coming to fruition.¹⁰ This is probably a sign that the concept is unworkable. A host of decisions would need to be faced in a congregation that included both permanent and temporary members: financial expectations, for example, or voice and vote in chapters. Maintaining a distinction between the two groups could imply a second-class status for the temporary members; erasing the distinction would depreciate the perpetually vowed members' commitment.

Also, there is not now and never has been any indication that large numbers of potential entrants are clamoring for the option of temporary membership in communities with perpetual vows. If anything, the opposite is the case. In contrast, however, various lay movements that are similar to SMOs are thriving in the church—which may be a sign that the model is a more compatible and sociologically viable way of en fleshing a religious call in today's world.¹¹

Lay social-movement organizations are compatible with temporary commitment. In fact, many actually *expect* that their members will stay no more than three or four years. Prayer or volunteer groups specifically targeting high school or college students would be examples of these. A recently begun group is the St. Joseph of Arimathea Society—groups of high school students in Cleveland and Louisville who help provide



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dignified and reverent funeral services for homeless people, and for murder victims and deceased old and young people whose relatives are too few or too devastated to arrange a funeral themselves. The students provide singers and pallbearers, tend the “potter’s field” cemetery, and collect money for flowers and grave markers. More

traditional examples of student organizations include prayer groups (Athletes for Christ, rosary or adoration societies) or twinning arrangements with a school in a poor area. There is no expectation that the students will

remain members of these groups after their graduation, although they may be directed to affiliated adult groups which they may or may not choose to join.

A final advantage of religious social-movement organizations is that it is less devastating for the members if they dissolve. While no data exist on the number of failed attempts that preceded or accompanied the successful founding of religious orders in previous centuries, anecdotal evidence in our histories indicates that at least as many attempts to found religious orders have failed as succeeded. This appears to be true today as well. Of the 97 new religious communities listed in the 1999 *Directory of Emerging Religious Communities*, 24 had dissolved by 2006, and another 21 had lost members.¹² Founding or truly refounding a religious order is a chancy business, and those who commit their lives to one of these new groups risk losing both financial security

and mental/emotional health if they fail. Committing oneself to an SMO carries with it many fewer risks.

Outcomes

For those religious who are concerned for the preservation of their congregation’s charism, forming one or more SMOs could have several beneficial results:

- *Social-movement organizations may be effective recruitment vehicles for vowed membership.* With few religious teaching in Catholic schools, most young Catholics have never seen a sister or brother. And few religious interact with anyone younger than fifty on a deep or regular basis. How can young Catholics join a lifestyle they know so little about? How can religious invite those they never see? Participating with vowed religious on an ongoing basis in a soup kitchen, a prayer group, or an ecological project will help young people get to know the religious involved—and vice versa.

- *One particular social-movement organization may develop into the vehicle that will carry a congregation’s charism into the next generation,* after all of the former vowed members are gone. If so, this would finally realize the inclusive scenario that the “Transformative Elements” painted for the future of religious life twenty years ago. How could anyone say that a religious charism was extinct if, instead of a small number of vowed religious, an SMO of married, single, Catholic, and non-Catholic men and women were living it out by feeding the hungry, praying a particular devotion, tutoring poor children, or in some other way were bringing the founder’s original vision into the 21st century? “Life is not ended, merely changed.”

- A truly successful social-movement organization will often, however, contain a number of members who do want to devote their entire lives to its vision. *It may*



be that these members will not join the original community, but will instead begin a new one. If the first community is still around at this point, their wisdom and experience would be invaluable for the new group. If not, the stories of the SMO's original founder—the sister who started a free clinic in Appalachia, the brother whose soup kitchen mobilized a city to feed the poor—will serve as a template. After all, Frederick Ozanam (the founder of the St. Vincent de Paul Society) lived several centuries after Vincent himself. St. John Bosco had never met St. Francis de Sales. Throughout the millennium and a half that Catholic religious life has existed, many new religious orders or lay groups have been formed from old templates. SMOs could provide templates of this very kind.

Next Steps

I believe that social-movement organizations could be useful, both for religious congregations that have given up on recruiting vowed members, and also for more-viable communities that still attract some young people. For the former, it may be the last remaining way they have of passing on their charisma to a new generation. For the latter, it may help them attract even more new entrants. The next steps I would suggest to congregations wishing to found such organizations—or to foster the ones their individual members have already begun—are as follows:

- *Take inventory of today's society:* What are its deepest needs or desires? As I have noted previously,¹³ the best way to determine these needs is to look at what larger social movements are currently growing. The most pressing social movements reveal themselves by the large number of SMOs they spawn. Are there already

a lot of small environmental groups? Prayer groups? Adoration groups? Groups working with the poor? Women's groups? Check out the directory of associations on the Internet Public Library (<http://www.ipl.org/div/aon/>) to find out. Is there room for another SMO, locally, in this movement? For example, is there a group that the movement currently does not reach, such as Hispanics or high school youth? Is there a new tactic or way of addressing the issue that existing SMOs do not use? Could adding your congregation's spirituality or charisma deepen commitment to the social movement?

- *Take inventory of your congregation:* Who are your passionate members? What are their passions? How, if at all, do these passions relate to the charisma of your founder? What larger social movements do these passions relate to? Are your community's passionate members interested in leading or organizing a group to assist them in their work? Or, better, have they already done so? Are other members in your congregation interested in helping them?

- *What does the group still need in order to succeed?* Does it need to expand its pool of potential volunteers? Secure more stable funding? Plan for the founder's retirement? What is the optimum size for the group? Would expansion be good for it—or dilute its unique character? If the latter, can the group's model be “franchised” in some way, with separate independent chapters in various cities?¹⁴

- *What assistance can the congregation render?* Can your communications office help to publicize the group? Can your vocation personnel and/or associates help locate new volunteers? Does the group need a place to meet? Need mentoring in finances or grant writing? What about retreats or prayer days on the charisma? And



who in the congregation could provide these services? A weakness in any new religious organization is its “liability of newness,” which may lead to mistakes that imperil its very survival. A more experienced mentor could be a tremendous help.

It is obvious by now that religious life is at the end of one of the cyclic downturns which have recurred over the centuries. Rather than resign ourselves to our “inevitable” extinction—and thereby create a self-fulfilling prophecy—I think we should notice that the SMO model offers a way to midwife the new forms of religious life that will thrive and grow in the years ahead. The many permutations of this model already appearing—associate programs, lay ecclesial movements, mixed emerging communities—are foreshadowings, I believe, of an absorbing future. This is true even if most of them fail, as new ventures often do. More will continue to spring up until some “get it right.” With their centuries-long experience and the passions of at least some of their vowed members, today’s religious congregations could help in this rebirth.

Notes

¹ David Nygren and Miriam D. Ukeritis, *The Future of Religious Orders in the United States: Transformation and Commitment* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1993).

² A good example would be the third and fourth of the so-called “Transformative Elements” developed by the joint CMSM/LCWR meeting in Louisville in 1989—and cited on pp. 255 and following of Nygren and Ukeritis’s book. Supposedly, this is what religious life would look like in the year 2010. In hindsight, it reflects more wishful thinking than any real-world trends for vowed religious life.

³ For a fuller discussion of social movements and social-movement organizations, see my *Pathways to Re-Creating Religious Communities* (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1996), chap. 4.

⁴ See Elizabeth Rapley, *The Dévotes: Women and Church in Seventeenth*

Century France (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 1990), and Anne Taves, *The Household of Faith: Roman Catholic Devotions in Nineteenth Century America* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1986), for these waves of devotionism.

⁵ My own congregation has individual sisters—of whom I am extremely proud—deeply involved in all of these activities.

⁶ Or maybe not so famous—the citation refers to a line from Molière’s comedy *Le bourgeois gentilhomme*, in which a nouveau riche man is being tutored in literature and discovers that he has been speaking prose all of his life without knowing it.

⁷ See, e.g., Rodney Stark and Roger Finke, *Acts of Faith: Explaining the Human Side of Religion* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), chap. 7.

⁸ According to the Nygren and Ukeritis study, mission identity is the principal variable influencing a congregation’s success (see pp. 97-98).

⁹ Several religious families have known this instinctively. For example, my own Vincentian tradition includes, not only the Congregation of the Mission, the Daughters of Charity, and the various Sister of Charity Federation congregations, but also the St. Vincent de Paul Society, the Ladies of Charity, Vincentian Marian Youth, the Association of the Miraculous Medal, and the Missionary Cenacle, all of which are movement organizations of nonvowed laypersons. Similarly the Salesian family includes, not only the Salesian priests and Visitation nuns, but other vowed religious such as the Sisters of Mary Help of Christians, the Missionaries of St. Francis, the Salesian Missionaries of Mary Immaculate, and the Oblate Sisters of St. Francis de Sales, plus lay groups such as the Association of St. Francis de Sales and the Oblates of St. Francis de Sales.

¹⁰ I am not referring here to societies of apostolic life like the Daughters of Charity, who make annual vows, but rather to including an option for temporary membership in congregations whose members are now expected to make perpetual vows. Moreover, even among the Daughters of Charity, there is the assumption that one’s annual vows are really for life.

¹¹ According to the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA), *Emerging Communities of Consecrated Life in the United States* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2006, p. 16), ten of the twelve most rapidly growing new indigenous emerging communities in the U.S. are mixed communities with some, or all, lay members.

¹² CARA, *Emerging Communities*, p. 16.

¹³ Wittberg, *Pathways*, pp. 80-85.

¹⁴ The above-mentioned St. Joseph of Armithea Society seems to operate through “franchises”—the Cleveland and Louisville chapters appear to be separate from each other. Many other groups enlisting high school or college students operate similarly.

A Sampler of Potential (and Actual) Religious SMOs

1. “Franchised” Youth Groups (local school chapters, perhaps with a national headquarters supplying materials or training)
 - a. Volunteers supporting a local soup kitchen
 - b. A high school or college centering-prayer group
 - c. Group spiritual direction, big brother/sister spiritual mentoring
 - d. Adoration societies, sodalities
2. Ministry Groups (non-age-specific, perhaps linked nationally in a network or association)
 - a. Supporting crisis pregnancies
 - b. Companionship the dying
 - c. Running a women’s shelter
 - d. Strengthening marriages
3. Spirituality Groups (may have a centralized headquarters and/or a youth branch – see #1, above)
 - a. Devotion to a particular saint
 - b. Performance of a particular spiritual practice (Eucharistic adoration, centering prayer, pilgrimages)
 - c. Spiritual mentoring, group spiritual direction
4. Lifestyle Groups
 - a. Simple living
 - b. Intentional communities
 - c. Peace and reconciliation

Revisiting Religious Identity

In the years following the Second Vatican Council, much attention was focused on changes in religious life. Much writing and much effort have been directed toward rethinking or reimagining religious life. In light of all that, one might be tempted to say “Enough already!” An old saying has it that familiarity breeds contempt. Familiarity can also breed complacency and neglect. It might be good, then, to look once again at what it means to be a religious, to reflect on our religious identity.

Besides the decree on the renewal of religious life, *Perfectae caritatis*, Vatican Council II also spoke of the role of religious in *Lumen gentium*, the dogmatic constitution on the church. In chapter 6, §44, we read that the religious state “manifests in a special way that the kingdom of God and its high requirements transcend all earthly considerations, bringing home to all people

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