

The Many Reformations of Catholic Women's Religious Life

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Abstract

One of the last enactments of the bishops, as the Council of Trent ended in 1563, was to mandate enclosure for all consecrated women. This reflects a prohibition against the first steps toward apostolic, non-cloistered women's religious life, which was occurring at that time. This article examines some of the various "reformations" of women's apostolic religious life from the 16th century to the 21st century in South Africa. A case study is presented of Mary Ward's attempts to found a women's apostolic congregation and her persecution in the light of Trent's decree. The initiatives of Francis de Sales and Jeanne Frances de Chantal were also thwarted, but Louise de Marillac and the Daughters of Charity survived. Two significant reformations were the growth of apostolic congregations beginning in the mid-17th century and women's responses to the theology of the renewal of religious life of Vatican II, including its impact in South Africa. Because women's religious life came to Africa in Western structures and theology, principles of inculturation which guide the initiatives of making religious life African, are presented. The historical narrative is analysed through the lenses of women's agency and women's voice. Although male church authorities consistently tried to limit women's initiatives to shape new forms of religious life, which frequently caused immense suffering, women's apostolic religious life has evolved to be a very vibrant part of the life of the Catholic Church, including Africa, in the 21st century.

Keywords: Council of Trent; inculturation; Mary Ward; women's religious life; South African women's religious life; Vatican II; women's agency; women's voice

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Introduction

The focus of attention on the 500th anniversary of the beginnings of the Protestant Reformation in 1517 is on the dramatic theological and ecclesial changes set in motion by Martin Luther. However, this anniversary is equally suited to examine the many reformations of Catholic women's religious life. During these 500 years women's consecrated life has changed dramatically. Women have taken the initiative to develop new forms of religious life, even as their agency has often been thwarted by the male hierarchical power of the Roman Catholic Church.

This article will examine the effects of the Council of Trent's decree on cloister initiatives by women in the 16th and 17th centuries to develop new forms of religious life in light of Trent and the opposition which they met. The focus will be on the subsequent growth and development of apostolic (active) forms of religious life; the renewal of religious life mandated by the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) and women's implementation of it; some aspects of women's religious life in South Africa; and the issues at stake in the Apostolic Visitation of American sisters. This broad outline is significant for African women's religious life, since this form of women's religious commitment came to this continent from Europe, beginning in the 19th century and bearing the history of women's experience in shaping various forms of consecrated life.

This historical narrative will be interpreted through the perspectives of women's agency and women's voice. The question is asked: How has the agency of Catholic women religious enabled their structures and experience of religious life to evolve since the Council of Trent?

The Council of Trent imposes Cloister

In response to the earthquake of religions and social change that marked the Protestant Reformation, the Roman Catholic Church convened the Council of Trent, attended by bishops and theologians from 1545 to 1563. The objectives of the Council of Trent were to firstly initiate reforms that had long been delayed in the Roman Catholic Church, such as a bishop residing in his one and only diocese, and secondly to respond to the reformers.¹

¹ See John W. O'Malley, *Trent: What Happened at the Council?* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2013).

At the last session of the Council of Trent in 1563 the bishops decided that all women in religious life would now have to live in cloister; that is restricted to the convent and leaving it only for extraordinary reasons.

The decree stated:

Renewing the constitution of Boniface VIII which begins *Periculosus*, the holy council commands all bishops, calling the divine justice to witness and under threat of eternal damnation, to ensure that the enclosure of nuns in all monasteries subject to them by ordinary authority, and in others by the authority of the apostolic see, should be diligently restored where it has been violated, preserved most carefully where it has remained intact; they should coerce any who are disobedient and refractory by ecclesiastical censures and other penalties, setting aside any form of appeal, and calling in the help of the secular arm if necessary.²

The Council of Trent was referring to a document issued in 1298. At that time European society was in the process of granting legal status to women religious both in canon (church) and secular law. A woman who took solemn vows, for example Benedictine nuns, was seen as separate from lay women. These vows could be annulled only with great difficulty and ended a woman's right to ownership of money and property. Permission of the bishop had to be obtained in the very rare circumstance of someone from the "outside" entering the cloister.

Why would the bishops make such a decision with extreme canonical penalties? They were reacting to women's initiatives to begin non-cloistered communities, serving the needs of the local church through schools, parish ministry and what we today call social work. The bishops said "no" and mandated that any woman in such communities who had made simple vows of chastity, poverty and obedience had to make solemn vows and be cloistered.

In addition, cloister "became a tool in combating Protestant influence, and in shoring up the reputation of the clergy in the states of Europe remaining loyal to Rome."³ Civil authorities

2 Council of Trent, 1545–1563, Session 25, chapter 5, in *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, volume II, edited by Norman P Tanner (London: Sheed & Ward and Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press 1990), 777–778.

3 Ruth P. Liebowitz, "Virgins in the Service of Christ: The Dispute over an Active Apostolate during the Counter-Reformation," in *Women of Spirit: Female Leadership in the Jewish and Christian Traditions*, edited by Rosemary Ruether and Eleanor McLaughlin (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979), 140.

and families generally supported this ruling since it meant that the seclusion of the family was being extended to seclusion in the convent, lessening the possibilities of scandal.

The Council of Trent's insistence that women with simple vows take solemn vows also related to the question of dowries, since "solemn vows created more security for both convents and families, because according to canon law they were irreversible and excluded a girl from inheriting or bequeathing property, and from ever validly marrying."⁴ However, European society was changing and feudal inheritance laws were being abandoned and changed. The bishops acted against what was already proving to be helpful—women in communities with simple vows living lives of prayer and active service—in the hope of turning back the clock.

Angela Merici's Initiatives

A clear example of what the Council of Trent wanted to change and limit was Angela Merici's Company of St Ursula. Born in Brescia in Italy in 1470/1474, Angela trained as a teacher and later joined the Third Order of Franciscans, following the Franciscan rule and spirituality. Women joined her in various activities such as ministering to prostitutes. They lived at home with their families and took simple vows.

Angela did not intend to found a religious order; she organised women to "carry on some charitable work especially the work of Christian instruction."⁵ The work of the Company of St Ursula was both needed and welcomed; it received episcopal approval in 1536 and papal approbation in 1544.

Angela died in 1540 and changes began in the Company of St Ursula. Up to this time the women had worn ordinary dress but now they had to wear a distinctive religious habit and live in community. The Company of St Ursula grew rapidly and houses were opened in Italy, France, Switzerland and Germany. Their success proved the undoing of Angela's vision since clerics wanted them to be "a proper religious order, kept behind convent walls"⁶ as the Council of Trent had ordered. Some Ursulines took solemn vows and became cloistered while "others became congregations and were not bound to enclosure, although they eventually came under

4 Liebowitz, "Virgins in the Service of Christ," 141.

5 Quoted in Patricia Ranft, *Women and the Religious Life in Premodern Europe* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1996), 103.

6 Silvia Evangelisti, *Nuns: A History of Convent Life 1450–1700* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 209.

heavy pressure to adopt it.”⁷ This was especially true in France where the convents had grills and other barriers. There were also areas for classrooms and dormitories for the girls they taught.

Angela’s vision of the Company of St Ursula evolved into an institution which combined cloistered life with educational ministry to young girls. The Ursulines as a religious order made crucial contributions to female literacy in an era which was recognising the need for the education of girls.

Women’s Agency

Feminist theory includes interpretations of women’s agency and women’s voice. Both are important hermeneutical lenses through which to interpret the development of Catholic women’s apostolic religious life.

Mounira Charrad defines agency as “the capacity to act” and sociologically it is understood “within the context of specific social structures in given times and places.”⁸ Catholic women who were attempting to create new forms of religious life were constrained by the patriarchy and sexism of the male hierarchical church, which has a long and demeaning history. For example, Augustine of Hippo asserted that a woman is not the image of God when considering a woman alone, but only when joined to her husband.⁹

Agency is creative since it includes “the ability to act in an unexpected fashion or to institute new and unanticipated modes of behaviour.”¹⁰ The various initiatives of Catholic women after the Council of Trent’s decree clearly demonstrate creative and disruptive forms of agency.

Kelsy C Burke has developed a helpful schema to describe women’s agency in gender-traditional religions such as Catholicism, which “promote strict gender relationships based on male headship and female submission.”¹¹ This was certainly the situation after the Council of Trent, when women began to exercise initiative and met the force of ecclesial patriarchal

7 Evangelisti, *Nuns*, 209.

8 Mounira Charrad, “Women’s Agency across Cultures: Conceptualizing Strengths and Boundaries.” *Women’s Studies International Forum* 33 (2010): 517.

9 Augustine of Hippo, *The Trinity* 12.10, trans. Edmund Hill OP (Brooklyn, New York: New City Press, 1991).

10 Lois McNay, *Gender and Agency* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), 22.

11 Kelsy C. Burke, “Women’s Agency in Gender-Traditional Religions: A Review of Four Approaches.” *Social Compass* 6, no. 2 (2012): 122.

power. At the same time, feminist theory needs to be careful not to dichotomise women “as either being empowered or victimized, liberated or subordinated.”¹²

Burke analyses four agentic approaches. *Resistance* describes the initiatives of women “who attempt to challenge or change some aspect of the religion”¹³ which has been taken for granted. A contemporary example is Catholic women who challenge the teaching that only men can be ordained deacons, priests and bishops. *Empowerment* agency “assumes that the basic elements of gender-traditional religions are harmful to women.”¹⁴ Rather than trying to change the institution, women empower themselves to respond in a different way to oppressive beliefs or practices. They stay and dissent. A third approach is *instrumental* agency which “emphasizes external advantages (either material or relational) that may result from religious participation.”¹⁵ The education which women religious receive in their congregations empowers them personally but the male leadership may continue to trivialise them as “the good Sisters.” The fourth interpretation is *compliant* agency in which women “choose to conform to religious teachings”¹⁶ without challenging the agency. Within their religious tradition women find meaning in various religious practices; however, their actions are not agentic, but conformist.

Women’s Voices

Linked to the concepts of agency is the understanding of women’s “voice.” Who speaks? Women? Or men on behalf of women? For too long in the history of women and religion in the Roman Catholic Church men assumed that they knew what women thought and so they spoke for them, writing their biographies and interpreting their religious experience.

Diane T Meyers links women’s self-determination and voice in order that women can “construct their own self-portraits and self-narratives”¹⁷ in the midst of patriarchal cultures, secular and religious, which interfere with women’s agency and try to silence women’s voices. She cites Lugones and Spelman who assert that “self-determination is inseparable from

12 Burke, “Women’s Agency,” 123.

13 Burke, “Women’s Agency,” 123.

14 Burke, “Women’s Agency,” 125.

15 Burke, “Women’s Agency,” 127.

16 Burke, “Women’s Agency,” 127–128.

17 Diane Tietjens Meyers, *Gender in the Mirror: Cultural Imagery and Women’s Agency* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 5.

speaking in one's own voice."¹⁸ Women speak against the noise of patriarchy's assertion that women cannot and should not speak.

In their research and interviews with women, Mary Belenky and her colleagues heard them speak often of silence and voice: "speaking up," "being silenced," "not being heard," "feeling deaf and dumb," "having no word."¹⁹ They developed a seven-fold scheme of women's ways of knowing and speaking: silence; listening to the voices of others; the inner voice; the quest for self; the voice of reason; separate and connected knowing; and integrating the voices.

The narrative of the development of Catholic women's religious life since the Council of Trent includes elements of these experiences. Silence, or listening to church authorities, develops into trusting one's inner voice in the quest for being one's true self in God. As women develop their voices, they want to be heard.

Mary Ward (1585–1645): Silenced

Mary Ward's experience is a dramatic example of a woman trusting her inner voice and acting in the face of patriarchal oppression. In the late 16th century the Church of England, headed by Queen Elizabeth I, was the established church of the realm and Catholics were forbidden to practise their religion. Prisons were filled with Catholics who had defied the penal laws; priests were hunted and executed as traitors. This was Mary Ward's context when she was born on 23 January 1585 in Yorkshire.

Her family naturally expected her to marry. However, when she was fifteen she realised she had a vocation to the religious life: "This grace by the mercy of God has been so continuous that not for one moment since then have I had the least thought of embracing a contrary state."²⁰ Her family, especially her father, opposed her as did her spiritual director who felt she was not suited to the rigours of enclosed life. Eventually they yielded and in 1606 Mary left England for St Omer in what was then the Spanish Netherlands (now Belgium). She entered a Poor Clare monastery and spent a short time there, but left since this life was not as strict as she had

18 Meyers, *Gender*, 21.

19 Mary Field Belenky, et al. *Women's Ways of Knowing*. (New York: Basic Books, 1986, 1997), 18.

21 Mary Ward, *Till God Will: Mary Ward through Her Writings*, edited by Gillian Orchard IBVM (London: Darton, Longman and Todd Ltd, 1985), 9.

hoped it would be. During prayer she relates that God “showed me that this was not to be my vocation, and that I could without scruple depart.”²¹

Three Revelations

Three deep and powerful experiences of God’s call radically re-shaped her life. On 2 May 1609, while she was praying, she understood very clearly that “I was not to be of the Order of St Clare; some other thing I was to do.”²² She left and returned to England.

Mary lived in London where she visited prisons and did other charitable works. She had made a vow to enter the Carmelites unless her confessor directed otherwise. Later that year while she was praying she had what has been described as the “Glory Vision” which gave direction to the rest of her life. While dressing for the day she related:

I was abstracted out of my whole being and it was shown to me with clearness and inexpressible certainty that I was not to be of the Order of St Teresa, but some other thing was determined for me, without all comparison to the glory of God than my entrance into that holy religious Order. I did not see what the assured good thing would be, but the glory of God which was to come through it, showed itself inexplicably and so abundantly as to fill my soul in such a way that I remained for a good space without feeling or hearing anything but the sound “GLORY, GLORY, GLORY.”²³

Mary now returned to St Omer and a small group of women quickly gathered around her. They live in community and taught English children in the local area. Parents began to send their daughters to her school as they were sending their sons to the Jesuit school in St Omer.

As her community flourished, Mary tried to decide what rule of life they should adopt. In 1611, during prayer, she understood that she was to “Take the same of the Society. Father General will never permit it. Go to him.”²⁴ The reference was to the Society of Jesus and Mary understood that her new community was to base its way of life on the Jesuit Constitutions,

22 Ward, *Till God*, 19.

23 Ward, *Till God*, 24.

24 Ward, *Till God*, 27.

25 Littlehales, Margaret Mary. *Mary Ward: Pilgrim and Mystic* (London: Burns & Oates, 1998), 64; Ward, *Till God*, 29.

adapted for women. This meant that they would live outside a cloister, engage in active work such as schools, and wear simple ordinary dress.

Opposition, Suppression and Imprisonment

Mary met various kinds of opposition. St Ignatius of Loyola had forbidden the Society of Jesus to take care of women's congregations because he did not want them to be distracted from their apostolic work by being responsible for a specific convent. Most Jesuits understood Mary's desire to live the "same of the Society" as contravening Ignatius's instructions and opposed her. This was not Mary's intention; she and her community were already living various aspects of the Jesuit way of life. The real opposition to Mary's community was that this form of religious life was lived outside the enclosure. In 1615 she requested Pope Paul V to approve her institute. His reply was to the local bishop of St Omer, James Blaes (who was a Franciscan), to take care of these women while "the Apostolic See will deliberate about confirming their Institute."²⁵

But the institute was never approved. Even as the "English Ladies" spread out over Europe, their way of life was so controversial that the institute was first suppressed locally (Rome, Naples, Brussels) and then in 1629 a decision was made to totally suppress the "Jesuitesses."

Although she was frequently ill, Mary walked all over Europe to defend her way of life and her community. The final blow came on 13 January 1631 with the decree *Pastoralis Romani Pontificis*, when the institute was suppressed in very harsh language. Mary's work was described as a "poisonous growth (which) must be torn up ... we totally and completely suppress and extinguish, we subject them to perpetual abolition and remove them entirely, we destroy and annul."²⁶ Mary sent out a letter to all her sisters, saying that the decree would be obeyed.

On 7 February she was arrested in Munich "as a heretic, schismatic and rebel to the Holy Church."²⁷ For 10 weeks Mary and another sister, Anne Turner who was allowed to be her nurse, lived in a very small cell in a convent. She was released on 14 April 1631. With the

26 Littlehales, *Mary Ward*, 75.

27 Quoted in M. Immolate Walker, *Mary Ward Under the Shadow of the Inquisition*, trans. M Bernadette Ganne CJ and M Patricia Harriss CJ (Oxford: Way Books, 2006), 134–135.

28 Quoted in Littlehales, *Mary Ward*, 204.

decree of Suppression in force women did leave the institute, while others stayed together and continued to run schools, but not as religious. In 1632 Mary returned to Rome and was cleared of heresy by Urban VIII who allowed her to live in Rome with a few companions. She returned to England in 1639 and lived there until her death on 30 January 1645.

Gradually her institute revived, especially since similar active religious congregations of women were founded beginning in the 18th century. Its rule was approved by Pope Clement XI in 1703 and as an institute by Pope Pius IX in 1877.

Mary Ward and her sisters were derided because “they are but women”²⁸ and that was the core of the opposition: that women would dare to act independently to do good according to the truth of their experience of God and act in defiance of the decree of the Council of Trent that all women religious were to live in cloister.

Jeanne de Chantal: Vision Thwarted by Trent’s Decree

An almost exact contemporary of Mary Ward, Jeanne de Chantal (1572–1641) endeavoured with her spiritual director Francis de Sales (1567–1622) to begin a form of religious life for women that, using the example of the sisters Martha and Mary in Luke Gospel (Luke 10:38–42), “would combine Martha’s charitable activity with Mary’s contemplative virtue.”²⁹

Jeanne, a wealthy widow with four children, was engaged in charitable work in the French city of Dijon. In 1607 Francis, who was the bishop of Geneva but unable to live in his diocese since the city was Calvinist, proposed his vision to her which she welcomed. The *Constitutions for the Order of the Visitation* (1613) stated: “This Congregation having two principal exercises: one, the contemplation in prayer which must chiefly be practiced within the house; the other, the service of the poor and sick, principally of the same sex, it has properly chosen for Patroness Our Lady of the Visitation.”³⁰

In 1613, when Jeanne went to begin a house of the community in Lyons, the diocesan bishop forbade the sisters from visiting the sick which he saw as dangerous and unsuitable for women

29 Ward, *Till God*, 56.

29 Jo Ann Kay McNamara, *Sisters in Arms: Catholic Nuns through Two Millennia* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Oxford University Press, 1996), 465.

30 Quoted in McNamara, *Sisters in Arms*, 465.

of their social class. Francis tried to intervene but yielded to the bishop. Again in 1615 the bishop insisted that the women take solemn vows and be cloistered according to Trent's decree. Jeanne and Francis obeyed and so the original vision, of Visitation sisters actually visiting persons in need, was ended. Later they were allowed to run convent schools. The order flourished and when Jeanne died in 1641, there were 87 Vistandine houses, a considerable achievement in only 31 years.

Jeanne and Francis obeyed the Council of Trent's decree for a variety of reasons. Female contemplative orders such as the reformed Carmelites were flourishing and French Catholics understood cloister as the norm for women's religious life. Another was class. The women joining the new religious community were wealthy and to allow them to visit the sick and poor was a shocking thought. A third was Francis's position in the church. Evangelisti comments that as "a high prelate with an ecclesiastical career to nurture [and] he probably did not want to oppose and challenge the normative framework established for women by the Catholic Church"³¹ at Trent.

Louise de Marillac: Not a Religious Congregation

Another French woman, Louise de Marillac (1591–1660), working with Vincent de Paul (1581–1660), circumvented the Council of Trent's decree by creating a form of religious life which they asserted was not religious life—and so not bound by Trent's decree.

Louise was a wealthy widow when she met Vincent de Paul. He had been engaged in establishing various forms of charitable work in Paris and the surrounding area to care for the sick and the poor and had realised that women would be far more effective in this ministry than the priests of the Congregation of the Mission, which he had established. In 1633 Louise, together with four other women, founded the Daughters of Charity in her home.

The aim of this new group was "to honour our Lord Jesus Christ as the source and model of all charity, serving him corporately and spiritually in the person of the poor, whether sick, children, prisoners or others."³² Louise and Vincent insisted that the Daughters of Charity were

31 Evangelisti, *Nuns*, 223.

32 "Rules of the Daughters of Charity, Servants of the Sick Poor," in *Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac: Rules, Conferences, and Writings*, edited by Frances Ryan, D. C. and John E. Rybolt, C. M. (New York: Paulist Press, 1995), chapter 1, #1, 169.

not a religious order but women who took simple, private vows that they renewed annually.³³ Their life-style was to be among the poor: "... their monastery being generally no other than the abode of the sick; their cell, a hired room; their chapel, the parish church; their cloister, the public streets or the wards of hospitals; their enclosure, obedience; their grate, the fear of God; and their veil, holy modesty."³⁴

Louise and Vincent succeeded in establishing a non-cloistered form of religious life when the Ursulines, Mary Ward's English Ladies and the Vistandines met the force of Trent's decree and had to yield. Evangelisti argues that perhaps they succeeded because they promoted "a type of charity rooted in the secular world, which was based on single women engaged in public service."³⁵ Although the Daughters of Charity were founded only 70 years after the Council of Trent ended in 1563, the context of secular life was changing and the initiatives of women in the mid-17th century to initiate apostolic communities found a welcoming reception among the church.

The Sisters of St Joseph

A few years after the Daughters of Charity began in 1633, another non-cloistered community was established. A few French women came together to live a life of prayer and service in the 1640s. The community of the Sisters of St Joseph was founded in 1650 in Le Puy-en-Velay, France by Rev. Jean Pierre Medaille with the approval of the bishop of Le Puy. They took simple vows, lived in community, had no specific ministry or apostolate and wore the dress of the ordinary women of their time. Initially they supported themselves by making ribbons and lace. They were fired "with love for others and a vision of union with God and neighbor. This vision was to be achieved through prayer, service and reconciling love."³⁶

The Sisters of St Joseph grew rapidly and by the time of the French Revolution, they were in 12 dioceses. Their property was confiscated in 1793 and the community was disbanded. Some were martyrs because they refused to take the Civil Oath. They re-established in 1807,

33 Although now an established religious congregation the Daughters continue to renew their vows annually and do not make "final vows."

34 "Rules of the Daughters of Charity," chapter 1, #2, 169.

35 Evangelisti, *Nuns*, 229.

36 Our History-Sisters of St Joseph. <http://brentwoodcsj.org/about-us/our-history/> (accessed 13 May 2017).

expanded throughout France and later to North America. Their schools earned the support of the post-revolution government, which emphasised education.

Law Follows Life

The Sisters of St Joseph were the first of hundreds of similar women's congregations founded first in Europe and then across all continents, including Africa. The valiant efforts of the women founders (sometimes with male collaborators) responded to the needs of the times in terms of education, health care, social work and various types of pastoral ministry.³⁷ The history of each of them is a unique story of women's agency.

Yet, all of these congregations were "illegal" in terms of church law. A step forward was taken in 1703 when Pope Clement II reconstituted Mary Ward's congregation with the remark: "Let the ladies govern themselves."³⁸

In the early twentieth century two church documents *Conditae a Christo* (1900) and *Normae* (1901) set up a system for granting approval of the constitutions of these active apostolic congregations. Thus the decree of Trent on cloister was superseded legally. However, the 1917 *Code of Canon Law* imposed a semi-cloistered life-style on these congregations with minute prescriptions of religious life. Canon lawyers (all male) decided that the care of babies, the nursing of maternity cases and teaching in coeducational schools were unsuitable for women with religious vows.³⁹

The Renewal of Vatican II

Then came the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965), which mandated a sweeping renewal of religious life as lived by both women and men. There was ongoing controversy during the sessions of the Council about whether there should be a separate document on religious life. The point of discussion was whether including a section on religious life in the document on the church was sufficient. The bishops decided to discuss the doctrinal principles of religious

37 See McNamara, *Sisters in Arms*, 486–488.

38 Quoted in McNamara, *Sisters in Arms*, 488.

39 Mary Ewens, 1979. "Removing the Veil: The Liberated American Nun," in *Women of Spirit: Female Leadership in the Jewish and Christian Traditions*, edited by R. Ruether and E. McLaughlin (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979), 273.

life in what became *Lumen Gentium* “while the decree on religious life was to make applications inspired by them.”⁴⁰

Some religious priests at the Council felt uneasy at the direction the Council was taking with its emphasis “on the episcopacy and the local Church, the general interest in the lay apostolate, the previously unknown attitude of openness to the world with its advocacy of involvement in so-called temporal tasks” which “could threaten, directly or indirectly, the very status of religious orders.”⁴¹ These were male fears about the status of religious life.

How was the Council to speak of religious life in view of its evolving view that all the baptised “were called to the fullness of Christian life and the perfection of love” (LG 40)?⁴² Chapter six of *Lumen Gentium* is on religious life and a separate document titled *Perfectae Caritatis* on “The Up-to-Date Renewal of Religious Life” was written.

Early in the Council Cardinal Leon-Joseph Suenens of Belgium, author of *The Nun in the World* in 1962, observed that half of humanity was missing in the Council. Eventually in the third session in 1964, 23 women became auditors, 10 of whom were religious but they were excluded from helping to write the document about their vocation. Cardinal Hildebrand Antoniutti, who chaired the commission on religious life, absolutely refused to have any sisters participate in the discussions. So the sisters went by the “back door” and gave suggestions to friendly bishops. Mary Luke Tobin SL asked Cardinal Lawrence Sheehan on the commission to request a deliberative or at least consultative voice for the women religious but: “We didn’t even get to first base. He said he would ask the bishops about it, but that was the last I heard of it.”⁴³ Bernard Häring CSsR, a prominent theologian at the Council “pleaded for the nuns’ cause for greater inclusion to the council”.⁴⁴

Alberigo and Komonchak comment that “the decrees on the renewal of religious life and on priestly training were poor and destined to be forgotten.”⁴⁵ In the light of how women religious

40 *History of Vatican II*, volume 2, edited by Giuseppe Alberigo and Joseph Komonchak, translated by Matthew O’Connell. (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books and Leuven: Peeters, 1997), 474.

41 *History of Vatican II*, volume 2, 475.

42 “The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church,” in *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, edited by Austin Flannery, O.P. (Northport, New York: Costello Publishing Company, 1988).

43 Carmel Elizabeth McEnroy, *Guests in Their Own House: The Women of Vatican II* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1996), 175.

44 Kenneth A Briggs, *Double Crossed* (New York: Doubleday, 2006), 72.

45 *History of Vatican II*, volume 5, 550.

around the world, especially in the United States, responded to the call for renewal, this is a truly ironic statement. Kenneth Briggs comments that *Perfectae Caritatis* “became the one product of the Council that in hindsight the bishops perhaps most wished they could take back.”⁴⁶

In its 25 sections, *Perfectae Caritatis* clearly presents the principles which should guide the renewal of religious life:

“Return to the sources of the whole of Christian life and to the primitive inspiration of the institute” (*PC* 2)

The following of Christ (*PC* 2a)

The recognition that each congregation has its own charism (*PC* 2b)

There is a strong ecclesial focus and the spiritual life and prayer are stressed as central. The renewal “of the manner of life, of prayer and of work should be in harmony with the present-day physical and psychological condition of the members” (*PC* 3). All members must be involved in this renewal but “the competent authorities, alone” establish the norms of renewal including providing for “prudent experimentation” (*PC* 4). This last point was often contested when women religious embarked on the far-reaching renewal of their lives. Their decision-making bodies would decide but Rome might (and often did) say “no.”

Women religious around the world read the decree and set work to begin the 20th century’s reformation of religious life.

Themes of the 20th Century Reformation

The document mandated special renewal chapters to implement the Second Vatican Council’s vision of the renewal of religious life. These were generally held quite soon after the Council and change began. Often attention was given to the externals—religious dress evolved from medieval type habits to simplified dress or to ordinary clothing—but the heart of the renewal was different. It was about women’s agency and of “reading the signs of the times,” which Vatican II had adopted as a key methodology.

46 Briggs, *Double Crossed*, 78.

Structures of community life, including common prayer, decision making, apostolate (now usually termed “ministry”), and the women’s understanding of their responsibilities as members of the People of God, all began to change. This was not easy and some congregations faced severe internal divisions often labelled “liberal” and “conservative.” The leadership of some congregations found the call to renewal too threatening and chose to do surface renewal or none at all.

Women religious in the United States moved rather quickly, to the consternation of some bishops and clergy. Perhaps the most distressing event was the suffering of the IHM Sisters of California who were ordered by Cardinal James McIntyre to return to the pre-Vatican II style of religious life. Most refused and left the congregation to form a non-canonical community.⁴⁷

In Latin America, sisters began to make the option for the poor, which was the vision of the bishops meeting in Medellin in 1968, real as they moved from institutional ministry to accompanying the poor. These commitments led to martyrdom: the murders of four American sisters and a lay volunteer in El Salvador in December 1980 and the assassination of Dorothy Stang SND in 2005 because of her commitment to ecological justice.

South African Women Religious and Vatican II

South African sisters had a generally positive response to renewal, which involved more outreach to the poor. Vatican II occurred at the height of apartheid and the violence and repression of the apartheid regime shaped their response to renewal.

The Constitutions of two congregations clearly demonstrate an option for the poor. The Holy Family Sisters of Bordeaux, who came to South Africa in 1864, state: “We hear the cry of all those who are abandoned, and the option for the poor is at the heart of our apostolic choices” (*Constitutions* #120).⁴⁸ The Daughters of St Francis of Assisi, who were founded in South Africa in 1922, desire “to be a prophetic presence by following the Poor and Crucified Christ” (*Constitutions* #1)⁴⁹ and “acting like leaven and salt, we are to purify the cultures of our people through the Gospel” (#42).

47 See Briggs, *Double Crossed*, 117. Anita Caspary, who was the President of the IHM Sisters during this painful time, relates the experience in *Witness to Integrity* (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 2003).

48 *Constitutions of the Sisters of the Holy Family of Bordeaux*. Rome, 1987, 86.

49 *Constitutions of the Daughters of St. Francis of Assisi—Izimiselo Zama-Dodakazi KaFrancis Owebileyo Wase-Assisi*. (No publisher indicated, 1991), 35.

As the laws of apartheid became ever more draconian, women's religious congregations were challenged in many ways. Apartheid decreed separation in every way, including education. The Association of Women Religious raised the issue at its 1972 meeting: "White Catholic schools, being an implicit acceptance of apartheid, of white privilege and oppression, constitute a counter-witness to the Gospel, and should be closed as soon as possible."⁵⁰

A poll conducted by *The Star* in 1975 found that "75% of White South Africans voted against involvement of the Church in political matters."⁵¹ The Cabra Dominican Sisters disagreed and in a letter to Cardinal Owen McCann in late 1975, Mother Genevieve Hickey stated they had "plans for the immediate racial integration of our private schools," which she described as "the best and most practical contribution we can make in response to the call of the South African hierarchy to promote the cause of peace and justice."⁵² In January 1976 a few "coloured" female students were admitted to the Cabra's Springfield Convent in Wynberg in the Western Cape. An official of the Education Department was startled by this bold action: "What has happened to these nuns? All through the years they have always been co-operative and obedient. Why have they changed now?"⁵³

Some religious criticised the move since it did not involve a broader consultation with teachers, parents and the students themselves. Boner describes Hickey's initiative in the language of women's agency, saying that she "seized the opportune moment for action and succeeded"⁵⁴; a prophetic action which challenged other religious congregations to do the same. A few months later in July, the Southern African Catholic Bishops Conference endorsed the integration policy.

South African women's congregations are also challenged by inculturation. Religious life came to Africa in Western dress and thought patterns. Since Vatican II African sisters have continued to examine their way of life and ask profound questions about what it means to be African and a religious. The work of inculturation is that of agency. It has three tasks: recognising and naming one's experience which can involve harmony and disharmony; contradiction and

50 Quoted in Kathleen Boner OP, *Dominican Women: A Time to Speak* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2000), 321.

51 Boner, *Dominican Women*, 322.

52 Boner, *Dominican Women*, 323.

53 Quoted in Boner, *Dominican Women*, 324.

54 Boner, *Dominican Women*, 325.

ambiguity, a greater freedom to look at one's life critically; and becoming conscious agents in creating one's life and that of the community.⁵⁵

Women's Agency is Threatening to Patriarchy: The Apostolic Visitation of US Women Religious (2009–2014)

At the insistence of some American cardinals who opposed the forms of renewal which sisters had undertaken, the Congregation for Religious and Secular Institutes launched an "Apostolic Visitation" of all US women's congregations in 2009. American sisters had been very prominent in the post-Vatican II reformation of religious life. An Apostolic Visitation is a juridical process by an ecclesiastical body because of suspected doctrinal, moral, financial misconduct which those being investigated cannot remedy on their own. Much consternation ensued. There was significant support by the laity for the Sisters and from women religious around the world, who had seen American sisters leading the vanguard of renewal.

The Vatican wanted to limit women's agency, but it was too late since "a new form of religious life had been birthed as ministerial religious."⁵⁶ After Pope Francis had been elected in 2013, the Visitation process ebbed away. Reports were filed in Rome to be read by future historians of women's religious life.

The process of the renewal of Vatican II demonstrates that women religious have become epistemic subjects in their own right. This self-determination, both personal and communal "is inseparable from speaking in one's own voice."⁵⁷

Conclusion

Eileen Markey comments that "The history of communities of nuns was often the history of women gathering expertise and reaching out to marginalized people and of bishops reining them in, erecting walls and laws to lock them away."⁵⁸ These 500 years, beginning with the Council of Trent's decree on cloister to the many initiatives of women to create new forms of

55 Joan Burke SNDdeN, *Towards the Inculturation of Religious Life in Africa*. (Nairobi: Pauline Publications, 2001), 194, 197.

56 Sandra M Schneiders, *Prophets in Their Own Country* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2011), 30.

57 Meyers, *Gender in the Mirror*, 21.

58 Eileen Markey, *Radical Faith: The Assassination of Maura Clarke* (New York: Hachette Book Group, 2016), 92.

religious life, clearly describe courageous women's agency in spite of and in opposition to male hierarchical control, though not without tragedy such as that of Mary Ward.

Women's efforts to reform and renew their experience of religious life in a hierarchical and patriarchal church in which their experience is often not valued because as, Mary Ward was told, "they are but women" demonstrate that women do speak their truth in confident voices as they continually discern the leading of the Spirit of God. Then they act.

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