

The Future Enters Us Long Before It Happens: Opening Space for an Emerging Narrative of Communion

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Stories are really important. People in all places and times have told stories. They help to shape identity and wellbeing. They carry religious, moral and ethical codes. They're the glue that hold societies and cultures together.

Stories are carriers of our memories and memories are containers for grace. Think about how much of our lives are contained and conveyed in stories.

And yet the stories we tell may or may not be true. They may or may not be complete. They may or may not be fully informed. And most stories with historical bases likely evolve or need to evolve as new information and experience becomes available.

As a collective, our personal stories contribute to a larger, more comprehensive narrative in which we locate ourselves. Think of the narratives of our families of origin, the narratives of our congregations, the narratives of our country of birth.

I suggest that a "narrative" in this sense is an overarching story with a certain set of assumptions, understandings and perceptions that define or describe a group, a time, a culture. These assumptions, understanding and perspectives form some sort of cohesive whole. They don't, however, necessarily ensure accuracy or truth in the way that we might suppose. Narratives are typically rooted in particular worldviews. They create a certain reality for us. And it's very difficult for our perceived reality to be changed even with new information or experience.

I can offer a personal, although very mundane example.

For all of my childhood and a good portion of my adulthood I believed that my parents named me "Mary" because of a promise that they made to God. My brother – three years my senior – was born prematurely. He was so compromised at birth that there was a chance that he would not survive. My father told me that my parents prayed and promised God that if he survived they would name this child Joseph. And if they ever had a daughter they would name her Mary.

My brother survived. They named him Joseph. I was born three years later. And, keeping their promise, they named me Mary.

So the narrative that I carried with me for more than half of my life was that my name was a fulfillment of a promise made to God by my parents in gratitude for the life of the brother.

It was a lovely story. It just wasn't true. I discovered that it wasn't true very unceremoniously one day when I was talking with my mother and mentioned the story of how I got my name.

“What story?” she asked.

I said, “You know, Joe was sick when he was born and you and Daddy promised God that if he lived you would name him Joseph and you would name your first girl Mary.”

“Who told you that?” my mother asked.

“Uh. . . Daddy,” I said.

And my mother, never one to stand on sentiment, just sort of rolled her eyes and said, “Well, that never happened. I think we pulled your name out of a hat.”

I wanted so badly to believe the drama of the other story. It said so much about me and my name and my family and our relationships. It was a great story! It took me a long time to even want to admit the possibility that it wasn’t true, let alone allow it to influence me and to change one of the ways that I identified myself.

As I said, it’s a mundane example, but I had to allow a former narrative about myself and my family to pass in order to be able to create space for a fuller, truer story to emerge. I had to allow the story I told about myself and my family to be disrupted by new information – even though that new information completely changed my perceptions.

In many ways our culture, our church, our country and religious life are living in this somewhat uncomfortable, shadowy space in which long-held narratives are being disrupted by new experience and information. And new narratives, fuller narrative, more accurate and honest narratives are emerging.

Former narratives like American exceptionalism, Western dominance, American democracy and moral leadership are passing. While they may be grounded in some pieces of historical reality, they are no longer reflective of our current complicated reality.

Yet these former narratives have not all passed, and the new narratives have not all emerged. I believe that we’re living religious life in a liminal space in which our real work – the work of all of us together, all of us living this life – is to assist passing narratives about ourselves to pass in order to open space for what’s emerging to arrive. This is hard work, long work and undefined work.

Earlier this year the Congregation for Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life published (only in Italian and Spanish) reflections from a 2014 Plenary gathering celebrating the 50th anniversary of *Lumen Gentium* and *Perfectae Caritatis*. The document speaks of this liminal space and the importance of naming it for what it is.

(I’m grateful for Sr. Tere Maya for translating her notes on this document into English for me.)

“We should not be afraid to recognize sincerely that despite all the series of changes, the old institutional system has difficulty giving way, in a decided manner, to new models . . . We are living a stage of necessary and patient re-elaboration of all that constitutes the patrimony and identity of consecrated life within the church and history.”

Patient re-elaboration. How do we live and lead at a time like this? I suggest that one way is that we allow incomplete or former narratives to be disrupted by new experience and information. I suggest that we tell fuller, more complete, more accurate stories about ourselves so that fuller, more complete and more accurate narratives can emerge.

For many LCWR members including myself the presence of Dr. Shannen Dee Williams at last year's Assembly was a profound and powerful experience of disrupting an incomplete narrative about communities of white or predominantly white Sisters in the United States.

It is true that many of our congregations, including my own, and many of our Sisters, including my own, ministered in black communities and are committed to actively ensuring the dignity and rights of black people and people of other races. It is equally true that many congregations, including my own denied black women - and perhaps those of other races - entrance into our communities because they were black.

The truth exposed by Dr. Williams' research disrupts the dominant, yet simplistic narrative about white communities and our involvement with racial minorities. Her research demands that we reframe this narrative about ourselves. It demands that we learn to tell and to appropriate a more honest, fuller story of both sin and grace when we consider the history of most of our communities.

I know that this newly exposed truth is rippling through our regions and will continue to do so. Let these truths humble us. Let them claim us. Let them mature us. And let them lead us to true conversion and repentance, not simply lamenting with words, but rooting out every trace of supremacy or exceptionalism.

This kind of honesty is liberating. It's also a fundamental building block of justice making.

Jesuit theologian Jon Sobrino, writes of the importance of being honest toward reality, particularly when the reality is painful or involves suffering. The "problem of honesty toward reality (*in the broader social sense*)" he writes "stems from the problem of being honest toward one's own reality."

Learning to read our personal narratives and larger social narratives in service to one another is a profound act of justice. Telling complete and accurate stories - particularly in our country and world today - are personal acts of justice upon which larger acts of social justice are built.

I can think of no other time in my life time when the need to be honest toward reality has been so urgent.

Passing and Emerging Narratives

One of the more substantial narratives about religious life that I believe is passing - and urgently needs our assistance to continue to pass - is the diminishment narrative. A narrative that seems to be emerging in its place - and what urgently needs our assistance to open the space for it - is what I call a narrative of deepening communion.

I think that to be able to fully appreciate this narrative of deepening communion – or as much of it as we can perceive at this time - we have to unpack some aspects of the diminishment narrative first.

I want to say here that I'm not aware of any particular scholarship about this – other than people writing about the diminishment of religious life as a foregone conclusion of its sure and certain disappearance. What I offer here are simply my own observations and reflections. They may or may not resonate with yours but I offer them as a catalyst for reflection and conversation.

In its most simplistic sense the diminishment narrative goes something like this: Religious life in the United States reached its peak number and therefore the pinnacle of God's favor with the post-World War II vocation boom. That was the golden age for the church and for religious life in this country. There were enough priests and sisters and brothers to do all the work thought to be necessary to build the church at that time. Since then Vatican II happened. Vatican II called for the religious communities to renew themselves according to the vision of their founders. They did that. (And we're still doing that.) And yet renewal turned out to be the beginning of the end of religious life.

The Sisters left the schools to take secular jobs. The Sisters stopped wearing habits and started wearing street clothes. The Sisters stopped being faithful and became feminists. Now they're all old, signaling failure. And religious life is dying.

The corrective in this narrative is a return to the past.

If the Sisters would just go back into the schools, go back into habits and return to the faith, they would start getting vocations. And religious life would be revived again.

I realize that this is incomplete and overly simplistic in itself. I do believe, though, that these are broad underpinnings and assumptions of the dominant narrative that has shaped perceptions about religious life in recent decades.

The reality is that this narrative thrives on incomplete information and simplistic experience. The narrative begins with a brief historical anomaly that took place nearly 70 years ago. It ignores the centuries-old evolution of religious life throughout the history of the church. This narrative myopically focuses on Western or European religious life and ignores the groundswell and eruption of religious life in other parts of the world.

The diminishment narrative sees death as punishment for perceived infidelity. The paschal mystery, then, must be an epic failure. This narrative promotes a zero-sum, mono-culture game with rigid rules that equate orthodoxy with numbers, clothing and the degree to which our activities can be associated with the church as an institution.

The diminishment narrative is rooted in an unsustainable economic model of parish, school and religious life that in its time created the conditions for the full flourishing of Catholic culture in this country. Nearly every challenge that we're faced with at this time – from properties, to finances, to ministries, to how to care for all of our members – can be traced back to the donated lives and labor that our Sisters and brothers gave to serve the people of God in a rapidly diversifying United States.

At its core the diminishment narrative diminishes all of us. Every vocation. All of the church. Most of all, it diminishes God. Its origin is in a very small God and an overinflated image of humanity. It's rooted in a corporate God who ascribes to human notions of progress and growth rather than the rhythmic patterns of fruitfulness. The diminishment narrative reflects our fears and our uneasy and unresolved relationship with death. I believe that at the heart of the narrative is a suspicion, if not an utter, albeit tacit, rejection of both the incarnation and the resurrection.

This narrative made us ambivalent about ourselves and about the meaning of our vocation. It keeps our inner vision focused on what is neither important nor possible – unmitigated growth.

This is the narrative that created and perpetuated undue conflict which provided the basis for the Apostolic Visitation and the Doctrinal Assessment of our Conference.

While I believe that this narrative is still operative among many people - I also believe that it is being disrupted in a variety of ways and a new, more complicated and complex narrative about religious life is emerging.

The emerging narrative, a narrative of communion, is being shaped by new information and experience – some is readily visible to us and some not as readily available as we need it to be. Some of the new experience will be refreshing and liberating and some may be disturbing and challenging.

I believe that one of the fruits of both the Apostolic Visitation and the LCWR doctrinal assessment and mandate with each of their respective conclusions, is that they created a wider space through which the simplistic diminishment narrative can pass, and a more complex communion narrative can emerge. Our fidelity is no longer in question. Our validity and contribution to the Gospel and mission of Jesus, particularly in and to the wider culture, is no longer at issue. The ordinary creative tensions that we experience within ecclesial relationships can no longer be automatically considered - by ourselves or by others - as unresolvable conflicts.

Unlike the diminishment narrative's focus on religious life in North America this emerging narrative of communion expands its focus to the vitality of consecrated life and the eruption of spiritual energy throughout the world. It takes into account, as CICLSAL notes, the "dewesternization" or "de-Europeanization" of religious life that seems to be running parallel to the enormous process of globalization.

During the Year for Consecrated Life CICLSAL hosted a series of gatherings for various groups of religious women and men from all over the world. These groups included young religious, formators, religious women and men from across the Christian traditions, and a gathering of representatives from all forms of consecrated life and secular institutes.

Each group formulated a concluding message to Pope Francis and to the wider church. Each group speaks eloquently of the experience of communion within the diversity and universality of the Church, across charisms, institutes and expressions of religious life. They speak realistically about present circumstances and differences, acknowledging challenges as well as the need for healing and reconciliation.

The message from the gathering of all forms of consecrated life and secular institutes acknowledges that . . . "We need to collaborate with each other to be reconciled to those with whom there have been rifts, eager to go beyond the polarization of our regions, harshness and anger. . . . we need to leave aside our certainties and learn to intuit with a heart in love and with an eye that sees clearly God's plans as they unfold in novelty. . . . Above all, we need to ask ourselves what are God and humanity asking for today."

Elsewhere in their message they recognize that while vocations to various forms of life are declining in some areas, "we need to rejoice because the Spirit is donating vocations elsewhere." They noted the need for bold creativity to promote the enculturation of charisms without cultural rigidity.

The concluding message from the gathering of the young religious from all over the world, speaks of the "serious and deep" communion between various charisms and forms of consecrated life and their heartfelt commitment to live out this communion "with ever greater intensity in the places where they live."

These gatherings during the Year for Consecrated Life offer a powerful witness to the catholicity of our church and to global communion and solidarity. Consider what God and humanity are asking for today. Consider what it means to raise up and make visible intercultural diversity and inclusion at a time when fundamentalist and nationalist movements are threatening whole societies.

In this country the signs of deepening communion among men and women religious are bubbling up in unique ways, all of which I believe all point to this emerging narrative.

Within the last two years two bodies of research on religious life in the United States were published. Both of these pieces of research illumine the growing diversity and globalization of religious life in the United States.

Earlier this year Trinity Washington University and the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) published the preliminary results of a study of international sisters in the United States. The study was conducted by Sister of Notre Dame de Namur and sociologist Mary Johnson. Mary and her team identified more than 4000 international Sisters – consecrated women who were born outside of the United States - who are currently in this country for study, formation or ministry.

Our sisters are coming from 83 countries across 6 continents. They're engaged in a variety of courses of studies and ministries, many tending to the needs of the poorest and most vulnerable in our society. Responding Sisters in this study are highly educated and those who are enrolled in studies consistently enrich the learning experience of their classmates. They add to and complement the already growing cultural and ethnic diversity of religious life in the United States.

Consider what God and humanity are asking for today.

Consider what this ecclesial reality of cultural and ethnic diversity witnesses to in a country whose government threatens to close or limit access to its borders in some new way with each passing day.

Also earlier this year, CARA published a third edition of its directory of Emerging United States' communities of consecrated life since Vatican II.

Currently there are 159 emerging lay movements and communities of consecrated life in the United States. They reside in 86 dioceses or eparchies in 36 states and territories. This represents a 31 % increase over the number identified in 1999. Approximately half of these groups are founded since 1990. They range in membership from 3 to over 400. These are both men's and women's communities. They self-identify with a broad range of charisms and spiritualities including hybrids like "contemplative-apostolic." They are founded for a variety of apostolates, most of which are not identified with traditional institutional works of religious communities

There are no studies that I'm aware of about emerging religious communities in other parts of the world. This reality, though, was a topic of conversation at three of the dicasteries we visited during the presidents' and executive director's our annual trip to Rome. Each of these dicasteries - CICLSAL, Evangelization of the Peoples and the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith - noted the challenges of assuring an appropriate degree of autonomy and guidance within ecclesial structures in order for these groups to discern the efficacy of their missions and charisms beyond their works and activities.

Each of these dicasteries suggested, too, that many of the congregations of our conference with centuries-long experience in discernment, spirituality, human and religious formation have valuable wisdom and experience to share with newer and emerging communities, both in the United States and throughout the world.

Consider what God and humanity are asking for today.

Consider what it might mean to bring the spiritual maturity and historical depth of centuries-old spiritualities and charisms to bear on the life and development of emerging communities in the church.

In addition to these relatively new experiences and expressions of religious life, there are a variety of collaborations and gatherings taking place among members of our and other religious communities in this country. I believe that these also signal a deepening communion into which we are being drawn for the sake of something larger than ourselves.

While I speak here only of experiences among women religious I'm also aware of a renewed energy and enthusiasm among religious men, as well. The 2016 publication of the Identity of the Religious Brother has been an occasion for religious men throughout the world and here at home to reflect on, raise up and to celebrate their vocation and their place in the church and in this deepening communion among consecrated women and men.

In this country – and, I suspect, in others as well - younger women religious, and perhaps younger men religious, are coming together across what I call their "houses of belonging" to fashion networks of deepening communion and mutual support or to cultivate their capacities for greater service to the church and the world. These newer, younger women religious are far more culturally, ethnically, theologically and ecclesialogically diverse than we their older counterparts.

In many ways the religious life that they are living is a fruit of the renewal and the deepening of relationships that has been taking place among women religious for decades. Relationships of mutual support and collaboration across congregations, provinces, charisms and conferences is the only way of religious life that many of these women know. They and other women and men entering religious communities in this country and all over the world represent a bold disruption to the diminishment narrative. They are already living elements of the emerging narrative of communion.

Although there are likely more, I offer just two examples of this.

Earlier this year 13 women religious under the age of 50 from a variety of congregations, both in LCWR and in the Conference of Major Superiors of Women (CMSWR), collaborated to write a collection of essays on topics such as the vows, community life, ministry, charism. The book, titled *In Our Own Words*, will be published by Liturgical Press in February. What I find most heartening about this endeavor is not only the collaborative style in which it was written, but the intentional attention to diversity and inclusivity that is represented by the variety of authors, and the range of topics, theologies, approaches and styles. This diversity and inclusivity illumines the universality and globalization of religious life in North America.

The recent Giving Voice gathering at Iona College in New York last month also represented the growing diversity of religious life in North America. Again, young women religious from congregations that are members of LCWR and CMSWR came together across their and our houses of belonging to create a rich, inclusive space intended to support one another in their vocations for the sake of their communities, the church and the world.

These women are not naïve, nor do they lack a sense of history. They're well aware of the boundaries they're crossing and equally aware of Pope Francis' call and reminder to religious men and women everywhere that our life – and each of us by virtue of our vocation are to be “experts in communion,” witnesses of communion in and for a broken world.

Consider what God and humanity are asking for today.

Consider what it might mean to our polarized country, church and global community if we were to allow elements of this emerging narrative of communion to disrupt former narratives of division and separateness among women and men religious and between women religious in this country.

Each of these realities disrupts some dimension of the diminishment narrative that we need to help to pass. Each contributes in some way to an emerging narrative of communion that witnesses ultimately to a deeper communion with God, with one another and with the world. .

The Path to Our Deepest Communion: Grief and the Heartbreak of the World

I would be remiss if I did not address what is likely the source of our deepest communion with one another and with the wider world. I am convinced that as leaders in our congregations and as women religious in North America today the path to our deepest communion with one

another, with God and with the wider world is the deep, unrelenting grief and heartbreak that marks our lives and the lives of our communities.

The emerging narrative of communion is essentially a paschal narrative. It's shaped not by human benchmarks of success and failure, but by the pattern of Jesus' life - emptied and human. It's a demanding narrative that requires nothing less than everything from us and from our Sisters.

I don't think that any of us can underestimate the bone-crushing weight of layers and layers of accumulated sorrow, sadness and grief under which we engage in this ministry of leadership at this time. We have vigiled at the death beds of far too many of our Sisters. We've waked far too many of our mentors. We've buried far too many of our elders, and we've stood motionless at the gravesides of far too many of our peers and those even younger than ourselves. We've wept far too many tears or we've simply grown numb from the almost daily reminder that life certainly has changed, and yet it has not ended. These are the heartbreaking losses that belong to God's time and not our own.

As if the grief of death is not enough, our communal sorrow and sadness goes even deeper into our psyche each time we transition one more cherished ministry to leadership other than our own, each time we divest of a beloved institution, parcel a piece of our homeland or place a motherhouse on the market. These are the heart-rending losses that are ours to lead or facilitate in service to a future that remains unclear and unknowable, and one that perhaps we will never see.

I think that in every way possible, we are living and leading so close to a gossamer-thin veil against which all those whom we love and who love us crowd together, whisper our names and tell stories of hope to comfort and console us.

"Hope," writes Cynthia Bourgeault, "fills us with strength to stay present. It is entered always and only through surrender, that is, the willingness to let go of everything we are presently clinging to. And yet when we enter it, it enters us and fills us with its own life . . . a quiet strength beyond anything we have known."

In his Letters to a Young Poet Rilke has one of the most moving descriptions of loss and grief as the gateway to the future that I've ever heard. It consoles me over and over again. And so I offer it to you. He writes:

"You have had many and great sadnesses, which passed, but please consider whether these great sadnesses have not gone through the center of yourself? Whether much in you has not been altered, whether you have not somewhere, at some point in your being, undergone a change while you were sad? For they are moments when something new has entered into us, something unknown; our feelings grow mute in shy perplexity, everything in us withdraws, a stillness comes, and the new, which no one knows, stands in the midst of it and is silent.

I believe that almost all of our sadnesses are moments of tension that we find paralyzing because we can no longer hear our surprised feelings living. Because we are alone with the alien thing that has entered into our self; because everything intimate and

accustomed is for an instant taken away; because we stand in the middle of a transition where we cannot remain standing.

For this reason the sadness too passes, the new thing in us, the added thing has entered into our heart, Has gone into its inmost chamber and is not even there any more – is already in our blood. And we do not learn what it was. We could easily be made to believe that nothing has happened, and yet we have changed, as a house changes into which a guest has entered.

We cannot say who has come, perhaps shall never know, but many signs indicate that the future enters into us in this way in order to transform itself in us long before it happens.”

In so many ways the religious life that we’re living is Rilke’s house – changed by the unknown and unknowable guest - the new thing, the added thing that has entered our hearts. Our future has already entered us, is already transforming itself in us. Our work in this house is to let the former things pass so that the future – already in our blood – can happen.

Psychologist Francis Wheeler writes that we are most alive at the threshold between loss and revelation and that every loss ultimately opens the way for a new encounter.

I believe that tending our grief over our own many and great losses and over the heartbreak of the world, clinging to the gossamer-thin veil at this threshold between loss and revelation and inviting others to do that with us is one of the most generous and generative acts of service that we could possibly render for our grieving sisters, for our hurting neighbors, for our broken world.

Consider what God and humanity are asking for today.

Grieving, notes Walter Bruggeman, is the work that belongs to a prophetic community in the midst of a culture of denial. Such a community may not be the happiest place in town, but it will be the most honest, where honesty is not an extreme concern in a culture of denial.

A prophetic community remembers that the resurrection took place in the midst of a community in grief. It came as a bold disruption to a former narrative of death.

Our own grief is a gateway to grace, not only for ourselves, but for our world. The grace that will come from embracing this paschal narrative of communion, will be costly but it will not diminish us. It will take our best energy and will not consume us. It will open us to the vitality that lies deep at the heart of communion with God, with one another and with the wider world. It will help us to speak new languages, and apprehend new images and tell new stories. It will remake us.

And while our grief is remaking us, we will remake the world.

I close with a poem by Gregory Orr:

Let's remake the world with words.
Not frivolously, nor
To hide from what we fear,
But with a purpose.

Let's
As Wordsworth said, remove
"The dust of custom" so things
Shine again, each object arrayed
In its robe of original light.

And then we'll see the world
As if for the first time
As once we gazed at the beloved
Who was gazing at us.

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