

Mary Ann Donovan's Response to Arthur Holder's Lecture:
Will Spirituality Have a Past?
Graduate Theological Union 2010 Distinguished Faculty Lecture—9 November 2010
The Future of "Spiritual Traditions"

"To study [a Christian spiritual tradition] historically is not to extract its essence or draw fences around the supposed limits of its charismatic reach but rather to set it in relation to a kaleidoscopic pattern of relationships with many other traditions that also stretch across immense distances of time and space."

If this is studying a Christian spiritual tradition, how do we do it? How does one set a tradition in relation to such a pattern? As I puzzled over the problem, I began to reflect on my own experience with remaking a tradition. I am a Catholic Sister, a Sister of Charity. I remember the night after I made my vows many years ago. I looked at the black veil hanging on my cupboard door. I smiled, and said to myself: "That is what I will wear for the rest of my life." At that very moment patterns were unfolding that would make a lie of that sentence. In fact, an entire way of life would come undone, and a correlative spiritual tradition would be reborn as transformed. There is a book here, but I am not going to write it tonight! I will limit myself to the experiences that led from that black veil to this purple dress.

Three interlocking powers were at play: Vatican II, the rest of the human race, and my religious order. Visualize three circles, with a shared overlap. The Vatican II circle includes many things beyond religious life – but there is that area of overlap. The rest of the race is busy about many things – and those who meet Sisters encounter us primarily as teachers, nurses, social workers, and the like. That is the area of overlap. Religious women know themselves as followers of Christ in a path marked out by their founder. In our case, that would be St. Elizabeth Ann Seton. Where is the overlap from our perspective? Our way of life is summarized in a Rule (or Constitutions) which the Church approves, and that same way of life involves service to others. So there is that double overlap with the Church and with those to whom and with whom we minister.

Vatican II's "Decree on the Up-to Date Renewal of Religious Life" sent us in three directions. The first was **back** to the sources, both of Christian life in general, and in the order's history. The second direction was, in a sense, **toward a mirror**. Our manner of life, of prayer, and of work was to be "suited to the physical and psychological conditions of today's religious."¹ That is a call for self-examination: what are those physical and psychological conditions? But the third direction was **outward**. That same manner of life, prayer, and work was to be "in harmony with the demands of the apostolate, with the requirements of culture and with the social and economic climate, especially in mission territories."² To go back to the sources of Christian life is to go to the Gospels and tradition, so the direction is toward the Church. To look at the order's history,

¹"Decree on the Up-to Date Renewal of Religious Life", #3. The document is normally cited by its formal Latin title, "Perfectae Caritatis."

²Ibid.

and at the physical and psychological conditions of today's religious is to look toward the mirror, that is toward the order itself. Finally, to seek harmony with apostolic needs and with culture is to look at what I have called "the rest of the race."

The process this launched us on began after the Council, and climaxed in 1986 with the approval of our revised Constitutions. In the interim what happened? For one thing, intense prayer. For another, multiple structured group interactions among the Sisters. For yet another, very intense study – of our history, of our founders' writings, and of the cultures in which we live and work. And what has changed? Most of us no longer live in convents. The day's schedule is largely determined by the needs of the apostolate. Formal community prayer has become the Divine Office, and of course Eucharist. Clothing is to be appropriate to our culture and ministry. Thus the purple dress! The intent of these changes was to put the Sisters in the midst of "the rest of us" and so to make us available to those who need us. In fact, without our explicitly intending it, our present way of life corresponds well to a directive St. Vincent de Paul wrote in 1672 for the Daughters of Charity, a directive which was in our Rule in the nineteenth century. Vincent said that, for the Sisters, their convent should be "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."³

Thank you, Arthur, for the opportunity to reflect on this material. My conclusion is that the post-Vatican II experience of congregational renewal undertaken by the Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati was indeed a process of putting our congregation's tradition in relation to a kaleidoscopic pattern of relationships. That raises two questions for you, Arthur. First, do you agree with me? Have I understood and rightly applied your insights? Or – and this is the second question – have I changed, expanded, or otherwise altered those insights? Again, thank you.

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³*Rules of the Daughters of Charity*, 1672, chapter 1, #2. English translation: St. Joseph's Provincial House, 1976.