Voices of Sisters
Religious Life



(Dreamstime/Oleksii Spesyvtsev)



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A bicycle with square wheels. Yes, it's possible! I just viewed a video on this kind of groundbreaking bicycle, and to my amazement, it works. And of course, nobody could doubt the fact that it's still a bicycle running on two wheels. It follows all the rules of physics and mechanical engineering.

If someone could do this to a bicycle, then how about trying to "reshape" our thinking about the future of consecrated life itself?

In an earlier column, I mentioned how the variety of forms and expressions taken by consecrated life in the history of the church are akin to those evolving in other religions over the millennia; reciprocal influences are inevitable as the world has been shrinking in size, gradually turning into a global village.

This anthropological and sociological phenomenon compels me to put on my thinking cap to see whether there continues to be something striking about the contribution of Christianity to consecrated life while preserving its evangelizing quality.

Consecrated life in our faith could be traced back to the early church, when men and women were captivated by Christ and felt called to walk in his footsteps through lives of prayer and dedication to serve the church's mission. Briefly, it evolved from the order of virgins and order of widows in dioceses to hermit life and monasteries in the deserts, followed by apostolic religious and secular institutes.

In most religions, there seems to be a pattern of change from individual forms of asceticism integrated with family life to separation from the world by living in deserts or forests, followed by monastic communities, and again to individual forms in loose associations and movements in the midst of the world. The Holy Spirit alone knows what creative shapes it could take in the future!

Chronologically, the earliest forms of monasticism emerged perhaps in Buddhism and Jainism, and still exist today. Jainism gives immense importance to nonviolence. In all religions, they stress some sort of renunciation (usually involving celibacy or abstinence), simplicity and austerity.

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Monks and nuns take vows and spend much time in meditation, study of scriptures, and service of others. They seek to grow in inner peace through detachment, and to become more mature with a compassionate heart, by following the teachings of their founders.

Since there's no dichotomy between so-called secular and sacred realities in Hinduism, its ascetic life called *Sannyasa* is not so widespread. It was usually embraced by individuals or couples in the final stage of life after fulfilling their obligations and duties toward their families.

Biblical studies reveal that Judaism had the nazirite vow, which was either temporary or permanent. The Essenes flourished during Jesus' times. In Islam, it is found among the Sufi mystics.

The spiritual masters or founders of these religions in the East were known for their quest for the Truth, liberation or enlightenment.

Interestingly, the understanding of "liberation" differs in these religions and is translated into "salvation" in Christian thought. Moving away from purely spiritual interpretations, theologies of consecrated life are intersecting with the complex sociological and political developments around the world, and mysticism and prophetism are expected to go hand in hand.

That's why contemporary monks and nuns in various religions are tending to be the spokespersons for the poor, oppressed and marginalized in society.

Sadly, some are getting involved in religious fundamentalism mixed with the politics favoring the privileged sections of society. They are driven by the pursuit of wealth, power, and popularity — a danger possible even in Christianity. Another risk is that it will become institutionalized to the extent that it loses its evangelizing quality.

Christian religious institutes have their own charisms and gifts of the Holy Spirit. Their founders were inspired by reading the signs of the times.

A common thread found in the ascetic life of major world religions is the pursuit of perfection with emphasis on celibacy, simplicity and obedience to a spiritual master/guide or head of a monastery, requiring strict adherence to the rule. Many of them live as mendicants.

In most religions, the soul is understood as feminine in relation with God, and there are traditions of marriage with the deity or quest for union with the Ultimate Reality. Today, there are parallels between the lifestyles of the order of virgins in Christianity and *Brahma Kumaris* in Hinduism. Similarly, some Jain monks and nuns are imitating the structures of contemporary religious institutes in Christianity.

So what does the future hold?

Perhaps consecrated life of the future will give more importance to the quest for Truth, liberation and enlightenment as seen in other religions of the East. But Christianity already finds these in Jesus Christ. So, would it take the form of digital communities in the globalized world? Or focus on eco-spirituality?

Whatever forms and expressions it may take, it will have to face the challenges of this fast-changing world by adapting itself — like the innovation of a bicycle with square wheels!