

## **Table Fellowship for the Breaking of the Bread**

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### **Abstract**

Called to live and serve in situations of cultural diversity, the Missionary Sisters of the Society of Mary (SMSM) are challenged to develop new methods in novitiate formation. Enjoined to hold the Early Christian community as a model of community life and mission, the researcher explores Luke's use of table fellowship as recorded in Acts 2: 42-47 and their experience of the « breaking of the bread » as an archetype for interculturality which she proposes as the means to which the SMSM can restructure novitiate formation for building prophetic communities for mission in today's globalized world. This article is a presentation of her findings.

### **Introduction**

Consecrated life has, at its source, the personal encounter with the Risen Christ – one that is present in society's least and last, with the desire to give the totality of oneself to Him. Lives offered in complete devotion to God and service to the marginalized caused Pope John Paul II to call this life form,<sup>1</sup>a gift from God for the Church and the world.<sup>2</sup>Originally, marginal movements made up of consecrated persons, through contemplative presence or apostolic engagement with the magisterium and the laity, continue the mission entrusted to the Church by Christ. Their public consecration manifests the Christian tension of making the Reign a reality in the here and now through prophetic presence, while conscious that its fulfillment is in God's time. Prophecy has been one of the hallmarks of this life form, with the lives of founding women and men, like the prophets of old, calling the Church to renewal. It is perpetuated by the entrance and consecration of adult Christians. Through a process called novitiate formation, new members are gradually initiated into the community life and mission of a spiritual family which then prepares them to live their Christian discipleship in a new way.

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<sup>1</sup>Sandra Schneiders refers to consecrated life as a "life form" rather than a lifestyle which focuses only on the way members of an institute of consecrated life live and work. Life form highlights the organic quality of this mode of Christian discipleship.

Sandra Schneiders, *Religious Life in a New Millennium: Volume I, Finding the Treasure: Locating Catholic Religious Life in a New Ecclesial and Cultural Context* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2000), 38.

<sup>2</sup>John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation on the Consecrated Life and its Mission in the Church and in the World *Vita Consecrata*, (25 March, 1996),no. 1.

Called to be attentive to the signs of the times, consecrated life today finds itself in a world of paradox. While greater ease of transport and rapid telecommunications facilitated by economic globalization give the impression that there are growing connections between diverse peoples, the rise of religious fundamentalism (e.g. ISIS), national separatist movements (e.g. Brexit), and political movements stressing ethnic or national purity expose the truth of continued fragmentation. Globalization has exacerbated the inequalities between nations and peoples and has led to the mass migration of people either in search of economic stability or seeking to escape political instability. Growing ethnic diversity challenges the hospitality and acceptance of nation-states. Conflicts over scarce resources are quickly labeled as cultural misunderstandings and political solutions swing between the assimilation of immigrants and thwarting their entry.

Since Vatican II, the faith communities of Africa, Asia, and Latin America find themselves playing a greater role in the life and mission of the Church. With the increased membership into consecrated life, institutes are not exempt from the present cultural phenomenon as the Church continues to become more polycentric.<sup>3</sup> Some institutes are new to the experience of ethnic diversity that has been brought by changes in their national demographic. As they branch out internationally, they respond to new charismatic intuitions and inquiries received from online media. Similarly, the mission is multi-directional, with evangelizers being sent from North to South, East to West and vice versa.<sup>4</sup> Thus, there is growing consciousness of the role that culture plays in the life and faith praxis of a person. Novitiate formation aims to guide new members into a deeper appreciation of their uniqueness, even as they are challenged by the Gospel and the constitutions of their institute to embark on a life spent in dialogue with others. There must be participation in the birthing of a new creation – a religious community that will mirror the Trinity. Living joyfully together amid cultural diversity permits consecrated persons to act as prophetic signs in our fragmented global context, one that has previously assumed that harmony is only possible when there is uniformity.

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<sup>3</sup>Antonio M. Pernia, “Challenges to and Opportunities for Religious Life from the World and the Church of Today” *USIG Bulletin Number 146* (2011), 36.

<sup>4</sup>Antonio M. Pernia, “Challenges to and Opportunities for Religious Life,” *Ibid.*

Interculturality and intercultural living are offered up by missiologists to aid the process. Anthony J. Gittins,<sup>5</sup> describes intercultural living as a faith-based way of fostering unity between culturally diverse peoples. Led by the Gospel and their constitutions, members of an institute engage in a process of reciprocity and dialogue which leads to greater cultural appreciation and conversion. Consecrated life can look to the early Christian community, for whom table fellowship and the breaking of the bread<sup>6</sup> had healed their struggle, creating communion between members of Jewish and Gentile origin. Their experience can be an archetype for increasingly culturally diverse institutes of consecrated life to change not only their lives together, but also their presence and service to the world.

What follows are the results of an investigation into the experience of the Missionary Sisters of the Society of Mary (SMSM), the institute to which the researcher belongs. The SMSMs have embraced multicultural community living and availability to the Church's universal mission. They believe that the implementation of new methods into their novitiate formation processes will support their endeavor to build joyful communities; the prophetic leaven needed to respond to their current global context.

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<sup>5</sup>Anthony J. Gittins was born in Manchester, England and is a member of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit and currently Professor Emeritus of Theology and Culture at the Catholic Theological Union in Chicago where he has taught Theology and Cultural Anthropology since 1984. He is the researcher of fifteen books on theological and anthropological topics, and on mission and spirituality. Information sourced from Catholic Theological Union website: <http://www.ctu.edu/academics/anthony-gittins-cssp>, Accessed November 13, 2017.

<sup>6</sup> Acts 2:46, NAB.