

Society of the Sacred Mission

A FULL CIRCLE

By Christopher Myers SSM

The Decree on the Up-to-date Renewal of Religious Life, promulgated at the Second Vatican Council held in Rome from 1962 to 1965, was a seminal document which considered the place of religious life in today's world.

Taking its lead from another important document, the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, it encouraged religious to clarify the charism and apostolate of their respective communities by rehearsing or re-imagining the vision of their founder.

I have heard of a number of communities which, having undertaken this process of introspection, concluded that they were not fulfilling their original purpose and decide to accept no new members, resigning themselves to their fate.

Not so in my experience of the society of the Sacred Mission. At a time of unprecedented uncertainty we have engaged in a process of unprecedented change, modifying our fundamental structures, adopting new constitutions in England, Australia and Southern Africa, and exploring new forms of membership.

The comments of some of the members, therefore, that 'this is not the community that I once joined', are entirely appropriate and indeed welcome, for they endorse the fact that the Society is continuing its evolution with the authority, I believe, of the founder himself.

Father Herbert Kelly spoke of the Society not in static, mechanical terms, but in organic, evolutionary language. He called the Society 'an idea' and 'an atmosphere'. Nothing was set in concrete; nothing was taken as an end in itself. Even religious life, conceived in a narrow, party frame of reference, was eschewed.

In 1919, leading up to the Great Chapter of 1920, Fr Kelly wrote: 'Some have always desired the stricter life; some have learnt to desire it. And to these, going back to simpler things seems mere slackin —apostasy from an ideal. But there are others to whom the whole vision has been a vision of devotion to the Church, and who have never felt any craving for a "life" of any kind—for itself. To me, the "Religious Life" for itself is a fortress, strong and self-contained. As a soldier, I abhor fortresses. The real work is done by a free-moving field army, intent on victory rather than on the defence and safety of its own position.'

Two years later, brooding on current events, he commented: 'If I started again, I would do the same thing, but without cassocks, without offices, and try for a ten-year profession to start with as a period.'

Fr Kelly thus affirmed his fundamental conviction that 'the purpose of the past are not bound by the systems of the past.' In 1931 he wrote that 'If I had known of it, I would have followed the Oratory system.'

The Abbot of a small Anglican Benedictine community in England recently remarked to one of our members that during the past decade or so, while the number of professed members of his community steadily decreased, yet there was a large and a growing group of people who wished to associated themselves with the community and its life.

We have experienced a similar phenomenon in the Society of the Sacred Mission. What is clear from such friends in Australia is that they desire a real and robust relationship with the community. They do not wish to be bound by the systems of the past, nor to be second-class hybrid members of a parallel community, but as one with the whole they wish to make their own particular contribution to the Sacred Mission in a way that is mutually enriching. Not a matter of either/or for the community, but of both/and. Not an exclusive narrow view of religious life, but a broad catholic one.

If it was anything, Fr Kelly's vision of the Society was broad. It sought to realise fully the potential of each individual, in whatever context, in order to maximise enthusiasm and devotion in the doing of God's will.

So said Fr Kelly in 1908, as he looked back to the early days of 1894; 'From the beginning we always prepared every man for ordination who could be prepared. Moreover, we always from the beginning meant to work at home as well as abroad...We were not seeking merely increased numbers of ordination candidates, still less only lay workers. We wanted to call out a whole mass of enthusiasm and devotion of all kinds, wherever it might be found, for all purpose.'

While it is clear that many of the systems which once undergirded Religious Life are grinding to a halt, inappropriate and ineffective in today's world, yet there remain waiting a mass of enthusiasm and devotion to be called out in fulfilment of the sacred mission.

If today we can find the energy and courage to discover anew and afresh the vision of our founder from those very early days in the life of the Society, then we might also by God's grace discern that we have travelled a full circle and rediscovered the purpose of the past.