

# The Identity of Religious Today

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Many years ago, I remember going to my first meeting of the Conference of Major Superiors for England and Wales. I nervously put on my habit and went down to face the crowds. And on the staircase I was stopped by a fierce sister, whom I had never met before. She looked at me witheringly and said: "You must be insecure if you have to wear that thing!"

## Where Have All the Vocations Gone?

We religious have been worrying about our identity for a long while now. Who are we? How do we fit into the fabric and structure of the church? Are we clerical, lay or some special hybrid of our own? I believe that no answer will be helpful unless we start from the fact that we share a crisis of identity with most people of our time. What makes us special? Well, it is certainly not having a crisis of identity. That is just part of the common lot we share with others. It is only worth reflecting upon if it helps us to live the good news for all those other sorry souls who are haunted by the same question: "Who am I?"

Please forgive me if I share with you a few over simplistic observations upon why this question of identity is an obsession of modernity. We have seen a profound social transformation this century, and especially since 1945. In Europe, and I suppose in the States too, we have seen the weakening of all sorts of institutions that gave people an identity, that defined a profession, a role, a vocation. The universities, the medical and legal professions, the trade unions, the Churches, the press, various crafts, all these institutions offered people not just ways of earning a living, a job to do, but a way of being a human being, a sense of vocation. To be a musician, a lawyer, a teacher, a nurse, a carpenter, a plumber, a farmer, a priest etc., was not just to have a job; it was to be someone; one belonged to a body of people with institutions that defined appropriate conduct, that shared a wisdom, a history, and a solidarity.

What we have seen over the last years is the corrosive effect of a new and simpler model of society, for we have all found ourselves members of the global market, buying and selling, being bought and sold. The basic institutions of civil society that sustained the professions and vocations, have lost much of their authority and independence. Like everything else, they must submit to market forces. In England even a football team exists now less to play football than to make a profit.

It became less and less clear that one could choose what to do with one's life. One had to satisfy the demands of supply and demand. It was not just we religious who lost a sense of vocation; the whole idea of a vocation became problematic. Nicholas Boyle, an English philosopher, wrote, "There are no vocations for anyone anymore; society is not composed of people who have lives which they commit in this or that particular way but of functions to be performed only as long as there is a desire to be satisfied." ! All these professions and crafts and skills were like little eco systems that offered different ways of being a human being. They have weakened and crumbled, like the fragile habitats of rare toads or snails. Society is becoming homogenised. All one is left with is the individual and the state, or even the consumer and the market. Much simpler but more lonely and vulnerable.

In the Church, I suspect that we have suffered from the blowing of this same cold wind, which left us also with a simpler and less confident community. For the Church too is part of civil society. We had been a complex society, with all sorts of institutions which gave us identity: We too had universities, hospitals, schools, professions and above all religious orders, which offered people vocations, identities which were shored up, respected, and honoured.

The Church had all sorts of hierarchies and structures that counterbalanced each other. To be a Mother Superior or a Catholic Headmistress was to be someone to be reckoned with! Priests quailed

as they rang the door bell. But to some extent our Church has gone through a similar transformation to the rest of society. And what we were left with was not just the individual consumer and the State or the Market; but the individual believer and the Hierarchy. We have lost confidence in other identities. And that is perhaps one reason why the question of priesthood, and who is allowed to be one, is such a hot issue for us. Because if you cannot get a foot on that ladder, then you cannot be anyone that really matters.

Who are we religious? How do we fit into the fabric and the structure of the Church? We often try to answer by placing ourselves in terms of that hierarchy. Are we lay or are we clerical, or somewhere half way between the two? Or we may answer by placing ourselves over against the hierarchy, as the prophetic individuals shaking our fists at The Institutional Church. But that is the wrong sort of map. I think that it is rather as if one were to look for the Rockies on a map that gave the boundaries of the States of America. Are they in Colorado or are they in Wyoming? Why cannot we see the mountains?

That map of the Church which is the hierarchy is a good and valid one. We are all on it somewhere. Some of us religious are lay, some priests, and some even bishops! But we cannot use it for locating religious life. It does not show us up for who we are, just as the Rockies are not on that map which is of the state boundaries. And you cannot even get clues as to where they are. Where there are no towns there could well be some mountains. But you need another sort of map if you are to see them clearly.

People often complain of the clericalisation of the Church. It seems paradoxical that at the Second Vatican Council we proclaimed a new theology of the Church; we discovered a theology of the laity; we were all part of the People of God on pilgrimage to the Kingdom. But the Church seemed in fact to grow ever more clerical. Instead of putting this down to a sinister plot, I believe that we should see this in the context of the profound transformation of western culture. In the world of the global market, there is no real place for people to have vocations, whether to teach, to nurse, or to be a religious. A job is just a response to a demand. And so when the Catholic Church entered the modern world with a bang, when Pope John XXIII threw open the windows, a cold wind blew down all sorts of other fragile vocational identities within the Church as well. Faced with the clericalisation of the Church, there are of course steps that can be taken to open up positions of influence to lay people and women, to loose the dominance of a clerical caste. But that is the subject of another lecture.

What I am saying here is that it would be a mistake to think that the answer for our crisis of identity is to abolish all hierarchy and go for a Church which is more like our liberal, individualistic society. That would not give us what we want. What we can see in our own society, on the streets of our great urban wildernesses, is that individualism is cruel. It makes urban deserts in which few can really flourish. Mary Douglas, an anthropologist, argues that women, for example, would do even worse in a more individualistic society. She wrote, "the processes of individualism downgrade the economically unsuccessful, and cannot but create derelicts and beggars. Members of an individualist culture are not aware of their own exclusionary behaviour. The condition of the unintentionally excluded, for example beggars sleeping on the streets, shocks visitors from other cultures." 2

According to Mary Douglas, a healthy society is one that has all sorts of counterbalancing structures and institutions that give a voice and authority to different groups so that no one way of being human dominates and no single map tells you how things are. Perhaps what we want is not to reproduce the homogenised desert of the consumer world, but to be more like a rain forest which has all sorts of ecological niches for different ways of being a human being. In that sense, we do not want less hierarchy but more. We need lots of institutions and structures that recognise and give a voice and authority to all those various ways of being a member of the people of God, such as women, married couples, academics, doctors, and religious orders. In the Middle Ages it was more like that. The emperor and the nobility, the great abbeys of men and women, the universities and the religious orders, all provided alternative foci of power and identity. We had many more maps upon which people could find themselves.

I read once in Cardinal Newman, and I have never again been able to find where, that the Church flourishes when we give recognition to different forms of authority. He names specifically tradition, reason, and experience. Each demands respect and needs institutions and structures to sustain it. Tradition is safeguarded by the bishops, reason by universities and centres of study, and experience

by all sorts of institutions from religious orders to married life where people hear the Word and reflect upon it in their lives. What we want then is not the individualism of the modern urban desert, but something more like a rain forest, with all sorts of ecological niches for strange animals that can thrive and multiply and give praise to God in a thousand different voices.

Who are we religious and what is our vocation in the Church? The answer to that question matters, but not just because it may give us the confidence to carry on and even attract some new vocations. It is important because to address it we must reflect upon that crisis of identity which afflicts most people today; no one is created by God just to be a consumer or a worker, to be sold and bought in the market place like a slave. If we can recover a confidence in our vocation, then we may be able to show something of the human vocation. The issue which we have to address touches upon what it means to be a human being.

### **Identity as Vocation**

I read the other day about a thirteen year old American boy called Jimmy, who got into trouble because he and his family insisted on his right to wear an earring to school. And they did so on the grounds that "Each person has the right to choose who he is." Of course in a way one wants to cheer on Jimmy. In a sense he is right. It belongs to being someone, having an identity, that one can make significant choices and say "This is me. I will wear those earrings." But one cannot choose to be absolutely anyone. If I were to decide to put on earrings, leathers, and drive around Rome on a motorbike, I expect that my brethren would object and say: "Timothy, that simply is not you." At least I hope they would! I can no more decide to be a punk than I can decide to be Thomas Aquinas.

To be someone is to be able to make significant decisions about one's life, but these somehow must hang together, make a story. To have an identity is for the choices that one makes throughout one's life to have a direction, a narrative unity. <sup>2</sup> What I do today must make sense in the light of what I did before. My life has a pattern, like a good story. One of the reasons why the professions and crafts were so important for human identity was that they gave a structure to large chunks of a person's life. A musician or a lawyer or a carpenter is not just something that one does; it is a life, from youth to old age, relaxing and working, in sickness and in health.

But our vocation as religious brings to light the deepest narrative structure of every human life. During my first class as a novice, the novice master drew a large circle on the board and told us: "Well lads, that's all the theology you need to know. All comes from God and all goes to God." It turned out to be a bit more complex than that! But the claim of our faith is that every human life is a response to a summons from God to share the life of the Trinity. This is the deep narrative in every human life. I discover who I am in answering that call. What he said to Isaiah he says to me: "the Lord called me before I was born, he named me from my mother's womb." A name is not a useful label but an invitation. To be someone is not to choose an identity off the supermarket shelf (hell's angel, pop star, Franciscan); it is to respond to the one who summons me to life: "Samuel, Samuel" calls the voice in the night. And he answers, "Speak Lord, your servant is listening."

Jimmy, I hope now with his earrings, is partially right. Identity is about making choices. But it is not just a matter of choosing whom you will be, as one chooses the colour of one's socks; the choice is to respond to that voice that summons one to life. Identity is a gift, and the story of my life is made up of all those choices to accept or refuse that gift.

Paul writes to the Corinthians, "It is God who has called you to share in the life of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord; and God keeps faith "(1 Cor 1:9). What I wish to suggest to you this morning is that religious life is a particular and radical way of saying "Yes" to that call. In a very stark and naked way, it makes plain the plot of every human life, which is the answering of a summons. In our odd way of life, we make explicit what is the drama of every human search for identity, as every human being tries to catch the echo of the voice of God calling him or her by name. Other Christian vocations, such as marriage, also do this, but differently, as I will suggest below.

### **Leaving All**

When we religiously discuss our identity, you can be pretty sure that before long the word "prophetic" will occur. And this is understandable. Our vows are in such a direct contradiction with the values of our society that it makes sense to talk of them as prophetic of the Kingdom. The Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata* uses the term. I am delighted when other people use that term of us, but I am reluctant for religious to claim it for ourselves. It could carry a hint of arrogance: "We are the prophets." Often we are not. And I suspect that true prophets would hesitate to claim that title for themselves. Like Amos, they tend to reject the claim and say "I am neither a prophet nor the son of a prophet." I prefer to think that we are those who leave behind the usual signs of identity. The rich young man asks Jesus "What do I still lack?" "Jesus said to him, 'If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come and follow me.' When the young man heard this, he went away with a heavy heart; for he was a man of great wealth" (Matt 19:21).

In the first place, our vocation shows something about the human vocation by what we leave behind. We give up many of the things that give identity to human beings in our world; money, status, a partner, a career. In a society in which identity is already so fragile, so insecure, we give up the sorts of things to which human beings look for security, the props of our unsure sense of who we are. We ask incessantly the question: Who are we? But we are those who give up the usual markers of identity. That is who we are! No wonder we have problems!

We do this so as to bring to light the true identity and vocation of every human being. First of all, we show that every human identity is gift. No self-created identity is ever adequate to who we are. Every little identity which we can hammer out in this society is just too small. And secondly, we show that human identity is not finally given now. It is the whole story of our lives, from beginning to end and beyond, that shows us who we are.

St. John writes, "Dear friends, we are now God's children; what we shall be has not yet been disclosed, but we know that when Christ appears we shall be like him for we shall see him as he is" (1 Jn 3: 2f). Throwing away the props is a sign that all human identity is a surprise, a gift, and an adventure.

Let me flesh this out with a few simple examples. This is not, of course, intended to be a complete theology of the vows, but a few suggestions as to how they touch the question of human identity.

### **Obedience**

In the Dominican Order, when you make profession you put your hands into the hands of your superior and you promise obedience. I suppose that in all our congregations, in one way or another, the crunch comes when you put yourself into the hands of your brothers and sisters and say, "Here I am; send me where you will."

Erik Erikson defined a sense of identity as "a feeling of being at home in one's body, a sense of knowing where one is going, and an inner anticipated recognition from those who count". A Well, obedience neatly wipes out that sense of knowing where you are going. One is given the glorious liberty of not knowing where one is headed. The religious is a person who is liberated from the burden of having a career.

A career is one of the ways that human beings tell the longer story of their lives and so glimpse who they are. A career, for those lucky enough to have one, gives a sequence and a structure to the stages of a person's life, as they move up the ladder, whether it is in a university, the army, or the bank. We do not have that.. However many times we might be elected to office, we go up no ladder. When I made profession, on the 29 September 1966, my career ended. I am and can only ever be, a friar. I believe that there is a legal document in France which includes in the list of those "without profession": priests and prostitutes. I remember as a university chaplain, my role was to be the one person on the campus without a role, who "loitered with intent," as the English police say when they arrest suspicious characters.

And we are not only at the summons of our brothers and sisters to go where we are sent; we are obedient to the voices of those who call upon us in various ways. I remember a French Dominican who came to Oxford to learn Bengali. He had been a worker priest for sixteen years, making cars for Citroen, or more often than not leading strikes and making sure that cars were not produced! But now Nicholas and his provincial came to the conviction that his life had entered a new stage, and that he would go to Calcutta and live with the very poorest people. And I remember asking him what he intended to do there. And he replied that that was not for him to say. They would tell him what he was to do.

The summons may come via the most surprising people. Our brethren in Vietnam have suffered many years of persecution, imprisonment, and often having to hide among the people. One of them, a lovely man called Francis, after hiding for a while, was finally caught by the police and imprisoned. And he said to his captors, "We should thank you. For we Dominicans had been living together, but when you came for us you sent us among the people."

The vow of obedience summons us beyond all the identities that a career could ever give us, and so beyond all the identities that we could ever construct. It points to an identity which is open to all those whose lives go nowhere, who never have a career, who never hold down a job or pass an exam or be a success. Our renunciation of a career is a sign that all human lives do ultimately go somewhere, however much they may appear to come to a dead end, for there is a God who faithfully summons each of us to life.

Every year the Justice and Peace Commission of the Irish Conference of Major Religious Superiors produces a critique of the government's budget, and ministers tremble as they await it. But one day, after a particularly savage report, the Prime Minister, Charlie Haughey, dismissed it, saying that it was hard to take seriously criticisms made by a group that called itself both major and superior. They took note and changed their name to the Conference of Religious. Not that I am dropping a hint!

## **Chastity**

The vow of chastity can be so hard to live because it touches so many aspects of our identity. I presume that this will be treated at length by the other speakers, and so I will only say a brief word.

For most human beings, the most fundamental sign of their identity is that there is another person for whom they are central; their husband, wife, or partner. This we do not have. However many people I may love and who may love me, I do not and cannot define myself by such a relationship. That is such a loss, such a deprivation that I do not believe it can be lived fruitfully unless one's life is deeply nurtured by prayer.

One of the most painful things, at least for me, is that one gives up the possibility of having children. In some societies that means that one can never be accepted as a man. I remember the desolation of a newly ordained priest who went to celebrate the Eucharist at a convent in Edinburgh. When the front door was finally answered, the sister looked at him and said, "Oh, it's you father; I was expecting a man."

It also reminds me of an American brother, one of whose names was Mary, following a pious Irish custom. He was sounding off about how the world was filled with weirdos and perverts these days. And a brother put down the paper he was reading and said: "Come on; why do you think you're so normal. You are called Mary and you are wearing a skirt."

One gives up father, mother, brother, sister, the whole defining network of human relationships that gives one a name and a place in the world.

I visited Angola during the civil war. I shall never forget a meeting with the postulants of the brothers and sisters in the capital, Luanda. They were cut off from their families by the conflicts which surrounded the city, and they were faced with a moral dilemma. Should they try to cross the war zone to find their families and support them during this terrible time, or should they remain with the Order? For Africans, with their deep sense of family and tribe, this was a terrible situation. And I shall never

forget the young sister who stood up and said, "Leave the dead to bury the (lead; we must stay to preach the Gospel."

So then, our lives are marked by a Great absence, a void. But this makes no sense unless it is lived joyfully, as part of a love story, that is the deep mystery of every human life. It must either be lived passionately, as a sign of that love of God which calls every human being to the fullness of life, or else it is barren and sterile.

So in our vow of chastity, we should be a sign of what is the destiny of every human being. Everyone is summoned by that love, even of those whose lives seem barren of affection, who have no spouse, no family, no children, no tribe, no clan, the utterly alone.

## **Poverty**

The vow of poverty, of course, goes to the heart of what gives people identity in the world of the global market. It is the renunciation of the status which comes with income, the ability to be someone who buys and sells. It calls us to be a real countersign in our culture of money. Of course we are not often that. As I write these words high on a hill above the Tiber in our enormous old priory of Santa Sabina, I can see a little shack on the bank of the river where a family is living and hanging out their washing. If it rains and the river rises, their house will be swept away. I look at them, and I blush to think how they see us.

I am reminded of how one of our provinces concluded a week's discussion on the vow of poverty with a slap up meal in an expensive restaurant. And one of the brothers remarked, "Well, if the week on poverty ends here, where we will all be next year after the week discussing chastity!"

But everywhere during my travels I have come across communities of men and women religious, of all congregations, sharing the lives of the poor, who are living signs that no human life is destined to end on a rubbish dump, that ever, human being has the dignity of a child of God. This Christmas I celebrated the midnight Eucharist with one of our brothers, Pedro, who literally lives on the streets of Paris. He celebrated the feast with a thousand tramps in a big tent, on an altar made of cardboard boxes, to symbolise that Christ was born that night for everyone who lives in cardboard boxes under the bridges of Paris. When he pulled the cork of the bottle of wine for the offertory, cheers rang out from around the congregation!

In each of these vows we see how some pillar of human identity is left behind, surrendered. We give up the usual things that tell us who we are, and that we matter and that our lives are going somewhere. No wonder we get unsure about our identities. But maybe our freedom is not to even care about who we are. We should be much more interested in who God is. As Thomas Merton once wrote: "You have called me here not to wear a label by which I can recognise myself in some category. You do not want me to be thinking about what I am, but about who you are. Or rather, you do not even want me to be thinking about anything much for You would raise me above the level of thought. And if I am always trying to figure out what I am and where I am and why I am, how will that work be done?" 5

In his autobiography, *The Long Walk to Freedom*, Nelson Mandela describes his great pride and joy when he bought his first house in Johannesburg. It was not much, but he had become a man. A man must own land and beget children. But because of his struggle for his people, he hardly lived in that house or saw his family. He made an option for something very like our vows. He wrote, "It was this desire for the freedom of my people to live their lives with dignity and self respect that animated my life, that transformed a frightened young man into a bold one, that drove a law abiding attorney to become a criminal, that turned a family loving husband into a man without a home, that forced a life living man to live like a monk. I am not more virtuous or self sacrificing than the next man, but I found that I could not even enjoy the poor and limited freedom I was allowed when I knew my people were not free. Freedom is indivisible the chains on any one of my people were the chains on all of them, the chains on all my people were the chains on me." 6

Mandela lost his wife, his family, his freedom, his career, wealth and status, from a great hunger for the liberation of his people. His imprisonment was a sign of the hidden dignity of his people which would one day be revealed. Few religious communities are quite as tough as Robben Island, but we too leave behind much that could give us identity, as a sign of the hidden dignity of those who have died in Christ. For, as Paul writes to the Colossians, "You died; and now your life lies hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is our life is revealed, then you too will be revealed with him in glory" (3:3f).

On Easter Morning, Peter and the beloved disciple sprint to the empty tomb. Peter just sees a loss, the absence of a body. The other disciple sees with the eyes of one who loves, and he sees a void filled with the presence of the Risen One. Our lives too may seem to be marked by absence and loss but those who see with the eyes of love may see them filled with the presence of the Risen Lord.

I do not wish to make an exclusive claim for our vocation as religious men and women. All human vocations, as doctors, teachers, social workers etc, say something about that human vocation which is to answer the call of the God who summons us to the Kingdom. What is specific about our vocation is that it shows this universal destiny through a leaving behind of other identities. The Apostolic Exhortation on Vita Consecrata speaks of us as "eschatological symbols." And that is surely true. Besides, it appeals to me. It would be nice to be able to put on your passport application, under profession, "eschatological symbol." But one could argue that even more than us, it is matrimony that is the eschatological symbol. It is the consummation of love, this sabbath of the human spirit when two people rest in mutual love, that gives us a symbol of the Kingdom for which we long. Perhaps we are a sign of the journey and the married couple of the destiny.

### **An Ecology for Flourishing**

I have tried to give a definition of the identity of religious life. It is a paradoxical definition, because it defines us as those who give up identity as understood by our society. But we cannot stop here (much as you may wish to!). In our society, which is hostile to the whole idea of vocation, and which is subverting the sense of identity and vocation of every human being, a neat definition is not enough. It would be like trying to comfort tigers threatened with extinction with a nice definition of tigerhood.

In this human desert which is the global marketplace, we need to build a context in which religious can actually flourish and be vital invitations to walk in the way of the Lord. What a particular religious order or congregation does is to offer such a context. In today's world, we may be tempted to think of religious Orders as being like competing multinationals: Do you buy High Octane Jesuit gas or Green Lead Free Franciscan gas? But the image that comes more readily to my mind is of each institute as being like a mini ecosystem which sustains a weird form of life. To flourish as a butterfly you need more than a nice definition; you need an ecological context that will get you from egg to caterpillar, and from cocoon to butterfly. Some butterflies need nettles, ponds and some rare plant, otherwise they cannot make it. For another form of butterfly, the presence of sheep droppings seems to be vital. Each religious congregation differs in offering a different ecological niche for a strange way of being a human being. I shall resist the temptation to think which forms of butterflies our various orders bring to mind, for the moment anyway!

A religious order is like an environment. Building religious life is like making a nature reserve on an old building site. You have to plant a few nettles here, dig a pond there, and so on. What do our brothers and sisters need to flourish on that journey, as they leave behind career, wealth, status, and the assurance of a single partner? What do they need as they make that hard pilgrimage from novitiate to grave? Each congregation will have its own requirements, its own ecological necessities, its own identity.

And this brings me to an apparent paradox: I have defined the identity of religious life as being in the giving up of identity, leaving behind the props and markers that tell people who they are. And yet our orders and congregations do offer us identities. We each have our distinctive styles. That is why you have all those terrible jokes about Jesuits, Franciscan, and Dominicans changing light bulbs!

I remember that when I told a Benedictine great uncle of mine that I intended to become a Dominican, he look hesitant and said, "Are you sure that that is a good idea? Aren't they supposed to be rather intelligent?" And then he paused and said, "No, come to think of it, I have known lots of stupid Dominicans."

But the paradox is only apparent. Each congregation does offer an identity, but it is a particular way of walking after the Lord, a particular way of self forgetfulness. A Carmelite should be happy to be one, not because it gives him status but because it is a particular way of giving it up. I need to delight in my Order, with its stories, its saints, its traditions, so that I can grow in the courage to give up gill that our society finds important. I love the story of Blessed Reginald of Orleans, one of the earliest friars, who said when he was dying that being a Dominican had gained him no merit because he had enjoyed it so much. I need stories like that to encourage me to flourish as a poor, chaste, and obedient friar, to rejoice in it as a liberty and not a prison. I need stories like that to liberate me from self preoccupation.

That is why I have great sympathy with the young religious who today often demand clear signs of their identity as members of a religious order. The adventure for my generation who grew up with a strong sense of Catholic and even Dominican identity, was to cast off the symbols that set us apart from others, like the habit, and immerse ourselves in modernity, let ourselves be tested by its doubts, and share its questions.

And this was right and fruitful. But the young who come to us today often are the children of that modernity, and they have been haunted by its questions since childhood. They have sometimes other needs, clear signs of being a member of a religious community, to sustain them in this very odd way of being a human being.

A final remark: We need an environment in which we are sustained in personal growth. The fact that we are called to leave behind those things which our society considers to be symbols of status and identity does not mean that we are absolved from the difficulties of growing into mature and responsible human beings. We all know brothers who want ever more expensive computers while claiming that the vow of poverty excuses them from worrying about money.

What we can see with our own eyes is that giving up family and power and wealth and self determination does not make us into wimps. No one could say that Nelson Mandela is a weak personality! But that growth into maturity will demand that we pass through moments of crisis. Do our communities sustain us then? Do they help us to live these moments of death as times of rebirth too? When an old monk was asked what they do in the monastery, he replied, "Oh, we fall and get up, we fall and get up, we fall and get up." 2 We need an environment in which we can fall and get up, as we stagger along to the Kingdom.

## **Conclusion**

Let me conclude by summing up in one minute the journey that we have made in this lecture.

The question that I was asked was this: What is the identity of religious life today? I answer this by saying that we must place this in the context of a society in which most people suffer from a crisis of identity. The global market wipes out all sense of vocation, whether you are a doctor, a priest, or a bus driven

The value of being a religious is that it gives vivid expression to the destiny of every human being. For every human being discovers his or her identity in answering the summons of God to share the divine life. We are called to give particular and radical expression to that vocation by leaving behind any other identity that could seduce our hearts. Other vocations, such as marriage, give alternative expressions to that human destiny.

But, I concluded that it is not enough to stop with a nice definition. We need more than that to keep us going on the journey. Each religious order or congregation should offer the necessary environment to sustain us on the way. And if we are not to be seduced by the consumer society, if we are to offer

islands of a counter culture, then we must work very hard to build that environment in which our brothers and sisters can flourish as we journey.

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1. 'Understanding Thatcherism,' *New Blackfriars*, p. 320. 2 *In the Wilderness: The doctrine of Defilement in the Book of Numbers*, Sheffield 1993, p. 46. 3 cf Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study of Moral Theory*, London 1981, ch 15. 4 Quoted by Theodore Zeldin, *An Intimate History of Humanity*, London 1995, p. 380. 5 Epilogue: *Meditatio Pauperis in solitudine*. 6 *The Long Walk to Freedom*, p. 750.

2. Quoted by Joan Chichester, OSB, *The Fire in These Ashes*, Kansas City 1995, p. 7.