

Apart and Together

Vocation in the Order of Saint Helena

ELLEN STEPHEN

The Order of Saint Helena is an Anglican religious community for women, both lay and ordained, which had its beginnings at the Margaret Hall School for girls in Versailles, Kentucky. In the early 1930s five sisters of the Order of Saint Anne went to Versailles to make a new foundation and to reopen the school, which had amassed a large mortgage. After the sisters had struggled with the school for a year or so, the Episcopal Diocese of Lexington turned it over to them, mortgage and all. Sister Rachel Hosmer recalled in her autobiography, *My Life Remembered*, “There were five of us, as I remember it, and not one was a qualified teacher.” In less than a decade the sisters had the school running efficiently.

The houses of the Order of St. Anne were autonomous; they elected their own superior, had their own novitiate, and were financially independent. The group of sisters at the school in Versailles were committed to outreach and justice. Following the outbreak of World War II in Europe in 1939, the sisters at Margaret Hall were instrumental in bringing to the school teachers and students who had been forced to flee from persecution in Hitler’s Germany. Real social awareness was developed in all the students, and eventually the school became racially integrated, which was remarkable in the South in those days before the Civil Rights Act. This spirit of courageous action owed much to the personalities of the earliest sisters, especially Rachel, Catherine Josephine, and Ignatia.

During the next several years some sisters moved away and others joined the community in Versailles, until in 1945 there were nine: Jeanette, Rachel, Ignatia, Mary Teresa, Catherine Josephine, Hannah, and Marianne, who were Life Professed; Frances, who was Junior Professed; and Mary Florence, who was a novice. These nine are honored as the Founding Sisters, and it is significant that from the start the order did not have one foundress, but a group of women coming, not without some struggle, to a common mind. On November 8, 1945, while remaining under religious vows, in accordance with the formularies of the Order of Saint Anne, and with the approval of the bishop visitor and the warden, the nine sisters transferred their obedience from the Order of Saint Anne to the Rule and Superior of an Anglican order for men,

the Order of the Holy Cross. There followed a period of transition and continuing discernment by the Versailles sisters, the Order of the Holy Cross, and interested bishops and other clergy.

Some aspects of the probation period were difficult, such as the decision to leave the Order of Saint Anne, and some were humorous. The sisters adopted transitional habits which were neither the gray of Saint Anne, nor yet the white of Holy Cross, and fashioned a new unstarched headgear. Sister Catherine Josephine wrote in her contribution to *Early Days of the Order of Saint Helena*: "Sister Rachel said she expected to look like the Little Flower in hers and instead she looked like Lawrence of Arabia." The Empress Helena, mother of Constantine the Great, was one of the patrons of the Order of the Holy Cross because of her legendary finding of the True Cross, and the newly founded women's community adopted her name as their own.

Father Alan Whittemore, OHC, who was then the superior of the Order of the Holy Cross, became the first superior of the Order of Saint Helena. Adam McCoy, OHC, writes of the joint venture of Father Whittemore and the founding sisters:

As Father Whittemore himself did, in their [the sisters'] worship and life they pursued a combination of contemplative quiet and order, even withdrawal, with the most radical concern and involvement with the contemporary world possible. They were the first community of women to embrace the ordination of women in the Anglican Communion, and yet they retain diversity of opinion on even that subject. They are the most Anglican of women in their dedication to consensus rather than authoritarianism. Their own journey, at first with Holy Cross, and then independently, has paralleled the journey of women in North American culture in an uncanny way. In many ways the Order of Saint Helena is Fr. Whittemore's most enduring legacy.¹

Holy Cross superiors continued for thirty years to serve as superiors for Saint Helena, although increasingly the monks delegated more authority to the assistant superior, a Saint Helena sister. In 1975 the women's order changed its constitution and elected Sister Andrea, OSH, who had been assistant superior under Holy Cross, as their own superior. In her later years Sister Catherine Josephine wrote a reflection in *saint helena*, the community newsletter: "I wonder if one reason we chose a men's Rule was that we saw in men's communities a greater spirit of freedom. Certainly this is part of our ethos today, as are other issues which the founding sisters felt to be important: the priority of prayer and community, concern for the rights and development of individual sisters, and witness for justice and peace."

The Purpose of the Life

The Order of Saint Helena has, from its beginnings, been diligent in discerning its true calling, and since the 1960s it has pursued intentional and

rigorous self-study. A continuing question underlying many of the topics at community discussions has been: what does monasticism mean for women of *today*? For the founding sisters of the Order of Saint Helena, it meant the wholehearted dedication of their lives to God, the desire for more prayer and liturgy, the freedom to take countercultural stands, and a context for bringing their individual calls to seek God into a community of praise and action.

The religious life is a unique phenomenon and invites careful examination. It has traditionally employed the terms “Father,” “Mother,” “Sister,” “Brother,” but it is not a family. It has used the term “community,” but it is not a town or a village. It usually has structures of authority such as boards and councils, which resemble those of secular organizations, but it is not a business. It has a purpose of praising and serving God, but it is not a church. It aspires to the psychological and spiritual nurturing of its members and those to whom they minister, but it is not a therapeutic group. In some forms of the life there has been an emphasis on study and teaching or healing but it is not, in itself, an academic institution or hospital. It is a growing and changing organism, and as such is blessed with living energy.

Women who are inquiring about vocation to the religious life, and specifically to the Order of Saint Helena, generally have three levels of questions. The first level consists of questions such as, “Why do you have those knots in your belt?” and “Why do you call your dining room a refectory?” These questions are valid, and can be answered. The second level of questioning is usually, “What do you do all day?” This also is a valid level of inquiry, and will be dealt with below. But the third level of questioning presents the most profound challenge: “What is the religious life *for*? What is its purpose?” The Order of Saint Helena has put a good deal of time and energy into coming to terms with these questions, both for its own sense of itself, and for those who are discerning a possible vocation.

The purpose of the religious life is, of course, basically identical with the purpose of the Body of Christ: to be the agent of bringing the world into the Realm of God. The “world” here may be described as “society as it is organized for self-aggrandizement”: the “world” Christians are called to renounce. Saint Paul uses the analogy of the human body to speak of the Body of Christ. The late Albert Rhett Stuart, bishop of Georgia, once said in a talk on spirituality at the convent of Saint Helena in Augusta that the religious life serves as the *eyes* of the Body of Christ. The eyes are not the most important part of the body — not as vital as heart or pancreas, for example — but their function is the valuable one of *vision*. The religious life, as it has developed in the Order of Saint Helena, makes provision for silence and solitude, for study and meditation, for teaching and preaching. These elements present both the call and the support for prophetic awareness and witness. St. Dominic is credited with saying: “*Contemplare et contemplata aliis tradere*,” which, roughly translated, is: “To contemplate, and those things contemplated to pass on to others.”

One thing the Order of Saint Helena has felt called to contemplate is truth, or reality as opposed to pretense.

This yearning to see what truly is — in God, in oneself, and in those with whom we live and to whom we minister — is a high calling, and a difficult one. It means going beyond the stereotypes that prevail in society, paying less attention to how people think we *ought* to be — and finding who we *really are*. What do other people think a nun is? How do others expect a Sister of Saint Helena to act, think, and feel? But how, in reality, *does* she act, think, and feel? Striving for radical seeing beyond the mask of one's persona belongs, perhaps, to the narrow way that leads to life. Jesus said, "The truth will make you free" (John 8:32). First it may make you miserable, but then it will make you free!

The religious life has often been seen as "the road less traveled," and sometimes as a way of folly or even as a dangerous path to be warned against. It has undeniably been so at times since it was reestablished in the Anglican tradition in England in the mid-nineteenth century. Many a woman aspiring to the religious life, when she has spoken of her call to a friend or relative, has heard, "Why would an attractive person like you want to throw your life away like that?" In response to such confrontation, sisters of Saint Helena have replied that life in community is a blessed and fulfilling one for those called to it, though blessing and fulfillment often come at a price. It is significant that the Gospel passage chosen by the sisters for the feast of their founding is the story of the pearl of great price (Matt. 13:44–46).

One example of the challenge of this way of living the gospel is to recognize its intensity. In most other walks of life there are three main components. There is one's faith (or nonfaith) system; there is one's relational identity and home life — partnered or single; and there is one's job or career. Generally, if there is stress in one of these areas there is support in one or both of the others. In the Christian religious life the three areas of faith, relational status, and work are unified under one commitment. This makes for a very intense lifestyle. At times sisters have found in outside ministry the support they were not feeling at home, but outside support does not fully eradicate the challenge; life in community has been called a "postdoctoral course in love."

The Religious Life as a Lifestyle

A lifestyle is a context to embody a life purpose. We come now to address the question: how is this life lived out — "What do you do all day?" Over the decades since its founding, the lifestyle of the Order of Saint Helena has undergone much change. Following the Second Vatican Council in the early 1960s, the Anglican orders began to look at themselves anew, and the Order of Saint Helena was in the forefront of self-study and renewal. When Sister Alice, then our assistant superior, appeared in a short white dress at the reception of a newly ordained friend, he exclaimed, "Alice, you've kicked the

habit!” In those early days of renewal — the late 1960s and early 1970s — at conferences of monks and nuns, one could hear *sotto voce* comments such as, “There is Saint Helena, and then there are the *real* sisters.” Over the years this attitude ceased to prevail, as almost all of the Anglican orders began to review and modify their formularies and customs.

“Renewal” for the Order of Saint Helena meant abandoning an almost slavish imitation of the lifestyle of nineteenth-century English foundations, which had, in turn, been copied from the Roman Catholic congregations of that period. The decisions of Saint Helena sisters, first to bond with Holy Cross, and then decades later to separate from them, were major factors in the women’s community finding “its own voice.” The two orders still affirm their close historical bond by frequent association and prayerful support. One of the distinctive marks of the Order of Saint Helena has been the dedication to hold the tension between letting go of inessentials while faithfully keeping the essentials of the life. The order has been at the forefront of renewal while remaining traditional. The religious life is a living organism: whenever a community *becomes* its rule, it is a dead or dying thing. The formularies serve to protect the rights of the individual members, and support them in choosing a generous living of the “freedom of the glory of the children of God” (Rom. 8:21).

All change is risky, and inevitably OSH made some mistakes. One such mistake was in regard to silence. Because of the intensity of the lifestyle, silence and solitude are of prime importance. At one point the sisters of Saint Helena experimented with dispensing with the Great Silence, which traditionally begins after Compline — the last office of prayer — and ends after worship and breakfast the next morning. It didn’t take the community long to bring back the silence. Living as closely as they did, they found that talking before breakfast was *not* conducive to even tempers and peacemaking!

As human beings we need enough space and silence to process the innumerable sense data that we receive daily into meaning. This is necessary in order to live what Plato called the “examined life,” which, he stated, was the only life worth living. One way that the order stands against the prevailing culture is to provide for its sisters and guests a place where there *is* some silence and space; where there is not constant background noise — TV, CD or DVD, cell phones or radio. People who come on retreat do bring their cell phones to the convent, but they are asked that they turn them off, in consideration for others and in order to benefit from a setting whose purpose is to be a sanctuary for peace.

Of course, the peace in convents, as anywhere else, is God’s peace: it often passes human understanding. There is an old story in Anglican monastic circles about a convent that experienced a particularly stressful weekend. On Friday evening the superior had to be taken to the hospital. The cook had a family emergency and phoned to say she would not be in. A large church group arrived to make a silent retreat, and at the last minute a vanload of

associates of the order who were passing through dropped by for the noon meal. The guest mistress developed a migraine, and one of the senior novices had to fill in for her. The next day the warden came for confessions and conferences. The novice who had acted for the guest mistress asked him: "Father, this past weekend was hectic past belief. But when the group of retreatants left, several of them said to me how peaceful they found it here. Were they not telling the truth, or am I crazy?" The warden is reported to have replied, "Neither, my dear. The peace is here, but it is not for you; it is for them."

Yet in a more profound sense the peace is meant to be for the sisters as well. Saint Seraphim of Serov said, "Find peace within yourself, and thousands around you will find salvation." Achieving that peace within oneself is, of course, a lifetime's job. The religious life is designed to support that life work. It is a eucharistically centered life, punctuated and enriched by the four daily offices — times of psalmody and song — which are said or chanted in choir. One of the outward and visible signs of the commitment of Saint Helena to renewal is the amount of prayerful time, talent, and energy it has put into the revising of its breviary, or choir book. Great care has been taken to follow the Book of Common Prayer and preserve the Gregorian chant, while bringing the words of psalms, antiphons, ancient monastic hymns, and canticles into inclusive/expansive language. Attempt has also been made to modify language that suggests military violence, outdated cosmology, and unnecessarily negative theology.

Complementing this prayer in common are times for personal prayer and intercessions for individual and world needs. The ministry of hospitality welcomes others to share the sisters' community life — whether for a week of silent retreat or just for a weekday Eucharist and breakfast. Individual ministries and witness radiate out from this central work of prayer and welcome, some offered within the houses of the order, some in neighborhoods, and some in distant places. A few instances of the order's outreach ministry are: work with a neighborhood center in a poor urban area, work in another city with the homeless, work to encourage justice issues and building community in places as distant as Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Afghanistan, work with Asian or Hispanic congregations, responding to very diverse requests for preaching and teaching the Good News.

One of the most significant expressions of outreach in the order's history has been the work of foreign mission. Sister Josephine wrote in her unpublished reflections:

In the autumn of 1961, Fr. Taylor [Superior of the Order of the Holy Cross] came to me with a desperate plea for help at the Holy Cross Mission in Liberia. The English Sisters of the Holy Name, who had been working there with Holy Cross for years, had announced their decision to withdraw. . . . So, we went for six months; the English sisters did not change their minds; and we stayed for ten years. We withdrew from Liberia only when the decision was made that it was time to Africanize the mission.

Since the early 1980s the order has also had close ties with Ghana, West Africa. Some OSH sisters have worked there, and several Ghanaian women have entered the order. There was a convent of the order in Nassau in the Bahamas in the mid-1970s, and since then a continuing visitation and association.

A development of prime importance to the ministry and lifestyle of the order opened up in the crucial years of the mid-1970s. Sister Mary Michael Simpson, OSH, had felt a call to the ordained ministry in the Episcopal Church from her college days, although at that time it was not a possible vocation for women. She did, however, spend two postgraduate years at the New York Training School for Deaconesses and Other Church Workers and by the summer of 1973 decided that God was calling her to the priesthood. As a life-professed sister she was permitted to seek ordination to the diaconate through regular diocesan channels. The 1976 General Convention approved the ordination of women, and Sister Mary Michael was ordained priest on January 9, 1977, thirty-one years after first articulating her call — the first woman religious ever to be ordained to the priesthood.

Since then the order has been welcoming ordained women, but not entirely without difficulty. An example of the challenge faced by the sisters surfaced with the custom of renewing their vows at the Eucharist following their annual discussions and chapter. Several of the sisters could not accept women as priests, and if a sister priest presided at the Eucharist the dissenting sisters felt they could not be present. Most of the community did not want to exclude them, but felt it was equally unacceptable to bring in an “outside” male priest for that special community event. As the situation was resolved, no one was wholly satisfied, but no one felt their wishes had been wholly ignored. It was decided that the renewal of vows would take place, not at the Eucharist, but at Vespers, where all would be in the chapel praying together.

The Order of Saint Helena has always complemented the call to works of active mission with a call to a more contemplative lifestyle. In the original Holy Cross rule that Saint Helena adopted, the Reverend James Otis Sargent Huntington, OHC, wrote, “Our vocation as an Order is to the mixed life, active and contemplative, yet the contemplative is that which alone can vivify and super-naturalize the active.” A number of the sisters over the years have explored dimensions of the contemplative life. Sister Rachel and Sister Ignatia among the founding sisters and, later, others made extended visits to contemplative orders in England and on the Continent and to the Poor Clares in this country to learn about the contemplative life. Sister Rachel and Sister Ignatia had a trial period of living a more enclosed life in one of the cottages on the property of the order’s largest convent at Vails Gate, New York. Sister Ruth spent two periods of one month each, first at a Roman Catholic contemplative community, later as a solitary in the cabin of a friend of the order, discerning this aspect of her call before choosing to return to the “mixed life” of the convent.

The active life and the contemplative life have unfortunately often been seen as opposed, and not, as they really are, complementary. In every religious house there are different proportions of prayer and ministry, but there must always be some of both. Not to have both contemplation and action would be like breathing in without breathing out, or having the heart function without both systole and diastole.

The life of prayer, individual and in common, and the work of loving God, oneself, and others, radiate outward from the daily celebration of the Eucharist and transect all of the outreach and ministries. That is symbolic of the True Cross of Saint Helena's dedication.

Questions of Leadership

The religious life has from its origins offered a context for women to utilize their gifts of leadership when it was difficult for them to do so in areas beyond the home and family. Leadership in religious life, as in life in general, is a particular gift; the Order of Saint Helena, even before its formal separation from Holy Cross, has held that it is the responsibility of the whole community to discern and raise up its leaders.

It is always easier to construct and perpetuate a hierarchical model of authority; consensus and the forming of the common mind take time and organizational maturity. The earliest attempts at community called on military models of authority, but by Benedict's time, in the mid-sixth century, there was already emerging a new concept of monastic leadership. Although final obedience was to the abbot, he writes in his rule, chapter 3, "On Calling the Brethren for Counsel": "Whenever any important business has to be done in the monastery, let the Abbot call together the whole community and state the matter to be acted upon. Then, having heard the brethren's advice, let him turn the matter over in his own mind and do what he shall judge to be most expedient. The reason we have said that all should be called for counsel is that the Lord often reveals to the youngest what is best." OSH has aspired to follow this precept, and to listen with respect to the ideas of the newest novice.

When authority does *not* listen to the voices of others it becomes oppressive. It is then often overthrown and replaced by no leadership at all, which is not the best alternative — it is a poor idea to replace tyranny with anarchy. In the 1960s and 1970s there was talk and some concern about a sister "doing her own thing." At what point did freedom become laxity, the respect for personal choice become a threat to the coherence of community? Questions such as these continue to challenge the order and its members, who strive to follow the leadership of Christ. Jesus called his disciples to no longer be only his servants, but to be friends. Being part of the Body of which Christ is the Head, being *friends* with God, the order strives to encourage leadership which is collegial and which expresses itself in service and love.

The transition from hierarchical to shared leadership, from privilege to responsibility, is an ongoing challenge and is not always smooth. It is crucial to discern how and when to raise up leaders and hand over responsibility. Responsible handing over of governance is very different from abdication. *King Lear* is a poignant example of why abdication doesn't work. Regan, one of Lear's wicked but shrewd daughters, said of her father: "He hath ever but slenderly known himself." If the hard work of self-knowledge has not been done, there will not be skillful discernment of authentic leadership qualities in others. Before a leader resigns, she should have done everything possible to ensure that others are prayerfully chosen and have been given all necessary information and support.

During the years leading to the establishment of its leadership council, the Order of Saint Helena learned hard lessons. It is an almost ineradicable human trait to project upon a designated leader one's hopes for the filling of one's wishes, and one's anger when wishes are denied. Such projections, both positive and negative, are a burden and even a danger for the leader unless she is spiritually and psychologically mature. Positive projections are especially hazardous. The person who receives such skewed regard from others may too easily begin to believe and identify with the image that this affirmative attention creates and to see herself as better, more powerful, and more attractive than she really is. I have known a number of leaders of religious communities who, when they went out of office, either left their communities or had some sort of identity crisis. "If I am not the person my community members seemed to relate to — then who am I?" The Order of Saint Helena has had its share of struggles.

To dispense with the mystique of authority, the Order of Saint Helena decided in 1997 not to be governed by a superior but by four sisters comprising a leadership council. Some Roman Catholic congregations had already been functioning under a conciliar mode of leadership, but the Order of Saint Helena was the first Anglican community to attempt this move. A primary reason for its decision was that it is harder to maintain a mystique of power around four persons than around one. A leadership council, working in consensus, also has the advantage of a broader perspective and, therefore, the capacity to make richer assessments of what issues need to be brought before the whole community for discussion and decisions. Having four women in leadership means that no one sister had to give up all of her individual ministry, as the work and functions of authority would be shared. It is of prime importance that the leadership council and community meetings be facilitated by a person who is both caring and objective. This person creates and holds a safe space where the community members can do their work of discernment and decision making.

Of course, community leadership also has its difficulties: confidentiality is harder with four people than with one, and communication needs more creative attention. Encouraging the formation of the common mind of the

community takes time and careful listening and spiritual energy. Our late Sister Catherine Josephine, when she was in a position of authority, used to say that when she was feeling pressured she made fiat decisions, but when she felt grounded and at peace within herself, she could listen to all sides and help enable the forming of a common mind. In summary, it has proved so far that for the Order of Saint Helena the advantages of consensual leadership far outweigh the difficulties.

Health and Healing in the Religious Life

Saint Irenaeus wrote: "The glory of God is a human being fully alive." To be fully alive is to be healthy, or as healthy as God's grace will have us be, in body, mind, and spirit. This is not to imply that sickness and infirmity, when they are unavoidable, do not also enable us to give glory to God; poor health, and, in fact, all suffering, can be the occasion of grace and spiritual deepening. But in the Order of Saint Helena in the last two decades there has arisen new intentionality in the areas of physical and mental health. In past centuries there was a general and insidious notion that nuns, if in fact they *had* bodies and feelings, should keep them hidden. It was not thought part of the lifestyle that a sister should do aerobic exercise, have psychotherapy this side of a total breakdown, or speak too openly about her feelings. It has been part of Saint Helena's commitment to renewal that has led the order to provide resources and support for the healing of the community and its members. There are line items in the budgets now for group and individual psychotherapy and what is called "preventive medical" for such things as memberships in the "Y," yoga classes, and, when indicated, other forms of therapeutic work.

The order has expended care and resources on its psycho-spiritual health. Health in this dimension may be described as freedom: in part it is freedom from the energy drain of neurosis. It is also freedom from dependence on roles, achievements, titles, or functions to prove one's worth or identity to oneself and others. When Moses encountered God at the scene of the burning bush (Exod. 3:8) and pleaded for God to reveal God's name for Moses to tell the people, God replied, "Tell them I AM has sent me to you." If God's name and identity is "I AM," and if each human being is made in God's image, then her or his secret name and identity is also "I am": sheer existence. There is no need for any other title or honorific to know *who one is*, though one may be happy to bear one's Christian name for sentimental and practical purposes.

To nurture spiritual health, the order provides for vacation time in addition to family visits, regular times of retreat, one "free" day a week, and, in the last decade, sabbaticals.

Thomas Merton wrote, "The victory of monastic humility is the victory of the real over the unreal."² To be real is, in part, to recognize that as members of a community we have differences and difficulties. It has taken OSH much hard work to be who we really are, and not what others, or ourselves, imagine

we should be. Here is a vivid example. When we were involved in self-study in the 1970s, there were several sisters who had smoked cigarettes before entering community but gave it up because, of course, “Nuns don’t smoke.” Then the sisters began noticing at conferences that the *monks* lit up and did not self-destruct. Was nonsmoking an issue of holy poverty, or was it a remnant of a nineteenth-century male sense of privilege? After that, sisters began making decisions about smoking based on questions of health, not on keeping up the appearance of piety.

There are some ways of accepting differences that involve much prayerful discernment. In the incorporation of women from vastly different cultures into our order, it is challenging to discern what is loving for both the individual and the community. How do we make provision for a sister to have food from her own culture and eat at the times to which she is accustomed, and also respect the monastic culture of meals in common? The order has dealt with concerns arising from accepting as a member an openly lesbian woman: could the community support her ministry of work for justice in issues concerning gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transsexual persons? The order decided it could, and did.

A healthy community perseveres in the discernment of reconfiguring itself to nurture the real needs of its members without losing its essential configuration. The Order of Saint Helena has experienced the “tough” and realistic love that enables hard decisions to be made, such as confrontation or even separation. A turning point in the order’s thinking about separation occurred when a former assistant superior left the community. In earlier days, that sister would have quietly disappeared and there would be no overt notice and no future contact. Any feelings of grief, anger, guilt, betrayal, or perhaps envy would have been repressed. On this occasion a simple liturgy was prepared. As the community gathered around the altar at the Eucharist, the sister who was leaving placed her life profession cross on the altar, and she was given back her instrument of life profession. It was then said, “You remain our sister in Christ.” The peace was exchanged, and many wept. The community then completed the Eucharist together. This event was criticized by some outside the community as celebrating the breaking of a vow, but Saint Helena experienced it as a solemn occasion to ritualize a reality.

Both psychotherapy and spiritual direction are contexts for healing and for growth. The Order of Saint Helena has employed both in a variety of ways, both as a community and for individual members. In the order there are sisters who receive both psychotherapy and spiritual direction, and there are sisters who practice one or both of these disciplines.

Relationship and Commitment

When the Order of Saint Helena was founded, the vowed life was generally accepted as a rarified but unquestioned state. In the milieu of the later decades

of self-scrutiny, the issue of the validity of life commitment continues to be questioned. Up to the present time the order has found that the opportunity to commit oneself for life is a graced way of living the gospel. In recent years, each sister who is in the five- to seven-year process leading to life profession is involved in mutual discernment with the community. Part of this is a yearly consideration of the maturing of her understanding of the vow. The vow is ritualized commitment, and commitment is an agent for bringing a relationship into maturity. Commitment, in life and in OSH, is a growth from childish dependency, through adolescent rebellion, to a maturity of chosen free mutual gift. It is understandable that the process of incorporation be misinterpreted as a system of success or failure, or of acceptance or rejection. A healthier perspective is the discernment of whether this is the right vocation for this person. Employing another analogy with the human body, the incorporation of a new sister is perhaps most like a heart transplant. Will this body give life to this heart? Will this heart give life to this body?

Conclusion and Future Possibilities

In the past, the religious life has often been considered a life of renunciation, and as such it is hard to see it as a nourishing vocational choice. But, as in any choice, some things must be foregone in order to make room for the more desired other thing; if we decide to marry, we renounce the possibility of having that relationship with someone else. If a poet feels a certain word is not the best one for her meaning, she erases or “renounces” that word in order to insert a better one. All Christians are called to be friends and, in a mystical sense, part of the redemptive Body of the Risen Christ. For many women who are called, the religious life is a way to live that life in profession, as “professionals.”

A part of the ongoing discussion of the Order is how to respond to future possibilities, and each sister listens for her own call within the call of the community as a whole. Where will she be called to teach, preach, pastor, listen, or confer? To what responsibilities and service is she called within her community and beyond it? She will consult and negotiate her choices with her household, and in the case of major commitments, with the order. In the same way, the order as a whole is constantly discerning its call in both responsive and proactive ways. Are there enough sisters to start a new foundation or undertake a new mission of the order? Where do the desires of the sisters and the need of the diocese or area intersect? Sometimes the order is invited to establish itself in an area, as when Bishop Stuart asked the sisters to come to his diocese in Georgia, telling them, “I don’t care what works you do, just be here and say your prayers.” Sometimes the order has initiated a work, as when in 1982 it felt called to work in the Pacific Northwest. Several sisters went to Seattle and Vancouver, British Columbia, to talk to diocesan leadership about the possibilities of establishing a house. The order consequently maintained a

convent in Seattle and offered a presence of hospitality, outreach, and mission in the Pacific Northwest for fifteen years.

With that we come full circle to St. Dominic's descriptive phrase, "To contemplate, and those things contemplated to pass on to others." We might even expand it slightly to describe the vocation of the religious life as it is lived in the Order of Saint Helena: "To contemplate God and to seek the truth, and those things we see and find, to pass on — in a multitude of differing ministries — to others." As long as the gospel message calls human souls into the love of God, of self, and of neighbor, opportunities and possibilities abound for the joyful sharing of the gifts of the Spirit. The religious life offers a rich context for such ministry.

Notes

1. Adam Dunbar McCoy, OHC, *Holy Cross: A Century of Monasticism* (Wilton, Conn.: Morehouse-Barlow, 1987), 179.
2. Thomas Merton, *The Silent Life* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Cudahy, 1957), 5.