

Marginality. Reflections on the future of religious life

Anne-Marie Bos

Introduction

Thank you for the invitation to share some of my thoughts on the future of religious life. Let me first shortly introduce myself: My name is Anne-Marie Bos. I am a Carmelite sister for 22 years now. I am one of the third order Carmelite sisters that share the life of prayer, community life and service to the people with the Dutch Province of the O.Carm Carmelite friars. We live in mixed communities of brothers and sisters. Due to canon law the brothers and sisters have different rights, but in real life we try to be as equal as possible. Of course there are differences between men and women, but we are primarily all different human beings with specific talents and gifts that complement each other. For the last nine years, I am vice-provincial (which is not a canonical position and therefore we can elect freely - brothers and sisters).

I am also an academic researcher at the Titus Brandsma Institute in Nijmegen, an institute for the study of spirituality. The Titus Brandsma Institute is a cooperation between the Catholic University in Nijmegen and the Carmelites. At this institute, various schools of religious life are combined (for instance Benedictine, Franciscan, Dominican – Sr. Catharina is one of the guest researchers - and Carmelite). I coordinate the research on the spirituality of religious life. My personal research is on Carmelite spirituality and I work on a critical edition of the writings of Saint Titus Brandsma.

I have been reading your contribution to the Synodal Process – in the way it was translated in Dutch and published by the KNR (Conference of Dutch Religious). In this contribution I have read about the awareness of vulnerability and weaknesses. We experience that our institutions become smaller, older, and not so much reckoned with by society and politics. The decrease of vocations is something that puzzles you too– is it a natural development, a result of our own shortcomings, or a sign of the Holy Spirit? I think it is probably a combination of these reasons. We can puzzle, look back, try to get closer to it.... but most important is probably that we try to accept it as our reality.

Question is: how do we behold our reality? How do we value it?

This afternoon I want to give some perspectives on the present reality that might help think about the future of religious life. I have chosen three subjects to focus on that I also found in your contribution:

1. Vocation
2. Marginality
3. Theology

First reflection (on vocation)

In Europe, only a few are attracted to religious life in the ways we live it. We share this decline with the Catholic church in general.

By the way, in the Netherlands, the most serious about forms of monastic life are nowadays people that are raised in Protestant Churches – but question is whether this will hold on in the near future, or that processes similar to what the Catholics face, will happen.

There seems to be a big gap between contemporary society and our religious life in which obedience and chastity are important. Also our Christian language is completely strange. Consecrated life is not for many. But we should not forget that this is nothing new. If we look back in the far history of Christianity this is nothing new. We can learn from the way our ancestors dealt with their challenges – not to copy their answer, but to find our own.

To give a short example from the Carmelite tradition. There was a time that the Carmelites feared to die out. It was when the Black Death had raged in Europe and monasteries were decimated. The Carmelite prior General, Saint Peter Thomas, then had a vision of Mother Mary. She told him in that vision that during the Transfiguration – when her son Jesus met with Moses and Elijah on the Mountain – that Jesus had told Elijah (of which Elijah is perceived to be the spiritual father) that the Carmelite Order would survive until the end of times. What I learn from that, is the perspective of hope, of future.

At the same time, many people search for a meaningful life, they find each other in their battle to act responsible for the environment, in their protest against violations to human dignity, or in taking care of refugees that are not welcomed by society. I see it as a sign of the Holy Spirit, that many values that our religious institutions foster, are taken over by others. But there is also a vulnerability in this transfer.

How will this work be grounded – what is the spiritual basis of this work? Some of these people do these works of mercy explicitly with respect for the Mystery of life – which they often do not call God.

How can we contribute to this foundation, this grounding?

To give an example: The Dutch Foundation of Carmelite Schools now exists for 100 years. The last 40 years they have become – step by step – institutionally independent from the Carmelite Order. It was a necessary development on behalf of the professionalization of education. At this moment the Foundation has 4000 employees and provides education for 35000 students. There are no Carmelites in the schools anymore, but the Titus Brandsma Institute was asked ten years ago, to help them in their project of further professionalization. They wanted to make work of their inspiration. As a Carmelite I am involved in this project. Trying to bridge Carmelite tradition and the schools by focussing on Carmelite values. I am very grateful to this opportunity – it is really inspiring, because it is not focussing on forms but on the underlying basis. And from there – searching for ways to realise it in our words and acts, in our being.

Second reflection (on marginality)

In your contribution to the Synodal Process, you speak about our vocation to go to the marginalized, to the peripheries. Jesus himself went to the periphery of Galilee, to the gentiles, to the outcast of society, to people living in darkness, for they will behold a great light....

Our world is full of marginalised people. Many groups of people are set aside and considered inferior, just because of gender, race, or age (too old or too young), lifestyle, being poor or being homeless...

We have a vocation to be present at geographical peripheries (places far from the centres of power and influence) and to go out to existential peripheries (situations of marginalization and need), to places where the needs of life can be felt. We are called to be present there – physically and by our prayers – to meet people in their material needs, intellectual needs and spiritual needs.

We have a vocation to go to these peripheries, but we experience to be people in the margin ourselves. All religious institutions started in the margin of church and society. But can we accept that we are marginalized ourselves?

Often marginality is something we try to avoid or we try to get away from, because it hurts. But exactly these marginal positions are what we are called for. It is our delight!

I like to point this out with two biblical examples: Mother Mary and Prophet Elijah.

- From Mother Mary we can learn that it is part of our Christian vocation not to walk away from suffering, but to be present on the way of the cross. Mother Mary carried the cross of her son carrying his cross. She is our example in that we have to carry our own personal and communal crosses and not walk away from each other when it hurts. We do not have to search for suffering; we are confronted with it, when we are open to our environment, in society, but also in our church communities. And if we have walked away from these crosses, we are called to turn around and return to this way of the cross.
- The Prophet Elijah gives the example of living marginality. In the book of Kings we can read that he was present in the periphery of Thisbe, Kerith, Sidon, Mount Carmel, desert, Mount Horeb, - at or across the northern, eastern, southern and western borders of the kingdom. He went there not to bring something, but to stay in contact with God. In the periphery, Elijah hears the word or gentle breeze of God, in the periphery he comes to discernment. And from there, he brings the word of God to the king. His presence already disturbs King Ahab in his power.

We are called to live in the periphery of church and society. Such a periphery can for instance be our prayer – communal and individual prayer - as the silent place in ourselves where we can hear, feel and discern. By this prayer we can become, as a fruit of it, a prophetic sign.

I see it as a spiritual challenge to make the deliberate choice wanting to live this marginality. Marginality as a positive and crucial element of religious life, as a source of creativity and renewal.

Third reflection (on theology)

In the Synodal Process I hear a focus on the unity and equal dignity of all the baptized people. This is an important issue. People experience differences. Some are male, some are female. Some have power, others not. Some have a high position, some are outcast. I do not have to repeat the elements that make that people are set aside. I regard the focus on the equal dignity of all as a crucial element for the future of church and society.

However, grounding this equal dignity in baptism, will always raise questions on the dignity of those who are not baptised.

I would plea for a theology that includes all; including all marginals, including all people. To such a theology Saint Titus Brandsma gives us an example, based on spirituality, that I find rather helpful. In his rectorial address on the concept of God, he underlines that we should think of God as a presence within ourselves. And if we see and acknowledge this divine presence in ourselves, then likewise we will see it in all that lives: in every fellow human being, in nature, in all creation – permeating everything and everyone.

The concept of God that Titus Brandsma advocates fits in with the way in which the mystics speak about God and human beings. Titus Brandsma' favourite saint, Teresa of Avila, for example, describes this indwelling and inworking effect of God in a very expressive way in *The Inner Castle*.

Saint Titus Brandsma speaks about God, but basically he speaks about life, about the holiness of all creation, the holiness of all people. Acknowledging the divine core of each person is the core of respecting every person, no one excluded. It would be the basis of a church that is open to all people; a church that tries to listen to the people, explicitly also to the people in the margins of society and the margins of the church; a listening church; a synodical church in which is spoken and listened; a church in which authoritative leadership is transformed into listening leadership; a church in which responsibility is a shared responsibility, communal; a church in which real conversations take place; a church in which the Holy Spirit is assisting to speak and to listen and in which differences of opinion may exist and are brought to a fruitful future.

Saint Titus Brandsma said: “I can't help it that God testifies of himself in everything... ” The Lord shows himself in the whole of creation, in all people. We all **are** those testimonies of God. However, we need the periphery to open our eyes for it and to testify of it.

Final word

I have given three reflections; on vocation, marginality and theology.

My question for you would be: what makes you hopeful for the future of religious life?