

Refounding Religious Life

A Choice for Transformational Change

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“Refounding is the work of divine initiative.
We do not refund our orders and congregations. God does.”
—Diarmuid O’Murchu

At the time of writing this article the news is awash with our congressional investigations into the finance and credit calamities, the mortgage meltdowns and the bailout of the auto industry. Washington says it is willing to help with the proviso that companies demonstrate a willingness to transform themselves and reinvent the way they do business. If we are to come through this recession having been transformed, these companies along with the rest of us will need to make radical changes. If there is to be renewed hope in the American spirit it will have to come from a new, paradigm-changing vision, just as it did during the Great Depression with Roosevelt’s New Deal.

The same might be said of religious life. If religious communities are to come through this era of diminishment, they will need to make more than incremental changes. They will need to be about deep and radical change. They will need to be inspired by a new vision and intent on transforming their lives. Some communities are choosing refounding for that very reason.

ORGANIZATIONAL CYCLES

All organizations go through cycles. In the business world, organizational cycles are well documented. So that we can better understand what causes any organization to diminish over time, let's briefly review what organizational life cycles look like.

Stage 1: Inspiration and Innovation

The birthing of a new vision is the cornerstone for any new organization. Often there is a charismatic leader who gives birth to a new vision with a burst of inspiration and energy. The leader's passion and dogged determination to actualize his or her vision evokes the same in others who are attracted to the cause. Undaunted by obstacles there is unwavering pursuit of the vision as the excitement of a new venture mobilizes those involved. *Inspiration* and *innovation* of both ideas and methods for carrying out the vision mark the early stages of any organization.

Stage 2: Rapid Growth and Experimentation

As this vision begins to take hold and others are drawn to it there is a period of rapid growth and development. Ideas, people, resources and projects accelerate exponentially. The system can barely keep up with the influx of new members, new ideas and new projects. Structures, organizational charts and projects are constantly being created anew as the venture builds momentum. *Rapid growth*, *experimentation* and *trial and error* learning are the hallmarks of this time in an organization's development.

Stage 3: Stabilization and Maintenance

Having found its stride and the means for carrying out a viable vision an organization begins to systematize, organize and stabilize. It seeks to maintain its success by institutionalizing its method with procedures, policies, structures and people who support it. Eventually the explosive growth slows to a steady pace. The organization has time to systematize its efforts preferring sanity, security and predictability over chaos. Offices and titles are stamped into the organizational

chart and behavioral patterns are stamped into the book of norms. *Stabilization* and *maintenance* of the status quo are hallmarks of this period.

Stage 4: Decline and Destabilization

The final stage of an organization's life cycle is decline and destabilization. The original vision loses its luster and participants lose their zeal. Inspiration and innovation are in short supply as what is predictable, controllable and manageable takes precedence over what is not. Those who offer a new way of thinking and the possibility for growth are judged and labeled disobedient, disloyal or crazy. The tried and true takes precedence over trial and error and the organization stops learning, adapting and growing.

The system is struggling to survive. It seeks reassurance by writing well-polished mission statements, carving statues and naming awards to honor its past champions. While it takes pride in past achievements and reminisces over the glory days, it is all the while calcifying and decaying. Having lost its root energy and divorced itself from contemporary relevance, new members are no longer attracted. New blood trickles to a halt cutting off a healthy supply of new energy, ideas and people.

Ironically a system begins to die by its own narrow focus on survival and its efforts to forestall the inevitable. It has come to value and has been designed to maintain what it has already accomplished. It places controls over innovation and experimentation so that adaptation to a changing world is prevented. Those who built and believe in the system are promoted and elected in order to keep it going. They serve and protect the system they believe in and unwittingly collude in its demise by preventing radical change.

CYCLES IN RELIGIOUS LIFE

In religious life, such cycles also exist. These cycles, well documented by Diarmuid O'Murchu, Lawrence Cada and others, are depicted as natural occurrences throughout the history of religious life. According to these authors and sociologists, religious life has gone through many such cycles, each lasting some 300 years or so. Most communities, about 75%

according to O'Murchu, will become extinct. Some will continue in a kind of minimal capacity. And some will successfully refound, birthing a new way of being and beginning a cycle anew. The Jesuits, Franciscans, Benedictines and Ursulines are but a few examples of communities that successfully refounded centuries ago when death seemed all but imminent.

What's important to recall is that most communities in North America are in the latter stages of this normal developmental life cycle. In widening the lens a bit we can appreciate the fact that the dying of any one particular community does not make it an aberration. If you are in a community in its waning years, it is important to appreciate that your community is part of a larger movement and in good company. Your current situation is neither unique to you nor is it the result of some kind of systemic character flaw or improper planning. Most communities are now in this fourth stage and no modern-day, sizable community has yet to claim public victory in their refounding efforts.

A TIME FOR HARD CHOICES

This critical period of decline and destabilization is evident today: diminishing numbers, advancing age, few if any new vocations, increased tensions between the demands of maintenance and the call to mission, a smaller pool of willing and able leaders, and actuarial tables that only project a continuation of these trends. By all accounts there are less than half the number of men and women in religious life than in the late 1960s. The trends in your own community are likely to be similar.

Some communities are in denial, some are in crisis and some are mired in chronic pain. In the midst of aging and diminishment, some are biting the bullet and making the hard choices. Some communities are *reconfiguring*, joining with other communities with a common charism. Some are *restructuring* their governance as well as reorganizing, downsizing and simplifying their efforts. Some are redoubling their efforts to *recruit* new vocations. Some are *regressing* and returning to ways of the past in the hopes of solidifying their identity and attracting new

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members. Some are *retiring* and planning their legacy. And some are choosing refounding believing that only this, the most radical of all options, can transform their lives anew.

Communities who are choosing refounding are doing so for different reasons. Some choose refounding over restructuring believing that changing the structures of governance does not, by itself, address the root problems. Some choose refounding over reconfiguring because they believe it is better to strengthen their identity, rather than lose it through union or merger. Others choose refounding over efforts to get new members because they believe religious life, as it exists now, truly needs to die in order to be transformed.

Many choosing refounding believe that reconfiguring or pursuing new vocations will not, by itself, resolve the underlying problems any more than having another child or building a new house will fix a troubled marriage. Some have argued, for example, that reconfiguring only creates a gerontocracy, a larger group of predominantly elderly members with no proportional change in youth available for leadership or external ministries. Some do not wish to invite new vocations until they get their house in order. Suffice it to say that while communities are choosing refounding for different reasons, they all desire a similar outcome—to transform themselves anew.

The time, energy and resources needed for radical change are running out. Perhaps for some communities the window of opportunity has already closed. In 1979, Lawrence Cada said this period would last 40 years in

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total and had another 15 to 20 years remaining from that time. David Nygren and Miriam Ukeritis said in 1992 that a ten-year window remained. By either account, the window has closed. More hope is offered, however, by O'Murchu who, in 1998, suggested that the period of transition for communities choosing refounding is still another 70 years down the road.

Whose prognostications are correct remains to be seen. Regardless of the odds, communities at a cross-roads will stand a better chance if their choices are proactive. The road ahead is challenging and the statistics are daunting. If history repeats itself, only 25% of all communities survive this period to see a new cycle. Each community must decide if it will be among the 75% that become extinct or will be among the most courageous and innovative communities risking it all to claim a future full of hope.

REFOUNDING AND WHAT IT REQUIRES

What is refounding and what does it take to be successful in such an endeavor? In surveying the literature one quickly discovers that very few authors have written specifically and comprehensively on the refounding of religious communities. Gerald Arbuckle and Lawrence Cada are two notable exceptions. Vatican II, of course, put forth a vision for renewal and many prophets have since challenged, encouraged and refashioned this vision. Sage spiritual leaders like Joan Chittister, Diarmuid O'Murchu, Michael

Crosby, Barbara Fiand, Sandra Schneiders, Margaret Wheatley and Patricia Wittberg are a few of these visionaries.

It is from surveying these prophetic authors, as well as from my own journey with communities as a facilitator and consultant, that I offer this synthesis regarding what refounding is and what it takes to embrace the journey. While I make no claim to have definitive answers, I respectfully submit the following departure points for ongoing reflection and to aid those on the pilgrimage of refounding.

Communal refounding is a process of personal and communal conversion initiated in response to God's call to choose life. It is a commitment to journey as a faith community into the dark night of the soul intended to transform minds, hearts, spirits and behaviors. It is a commitment to wrestle with the forces of sin and grace, life and death, as well as with the gift and shadow-side of a community's charism. It is a process that unfolds amidst the unending call for reconciliation and redemption.

Communal refounding involves a transformation of consciousness regarding a community's charism and its relevance for today's world. This paradigmatic shift in a community's basic assumptions and operating values opens the door for creating a new vision. Experimentation with and development of new mindsets, heart-sets and skill-sets are requisites for carrying out this new vision. The dual commitments of grieving what must die while birthing a new way of being are essential for embracing this expression of the paschal mystery called refounding.

This working definition can be broken down into five elements.

FIVE ELEMENTS OF REFOUNDING

Element 1: Transformation of Consciousness

Deep change rattles the windows through which we gaze upon our world. Our worldview, the fundamental ways in which we understand our life, our world and our God, must come into question as we travel the road to refounding. For refounding to occur, these paradigmatic shifts in consciousness must take place if a new vision, filled with hope and passion, is to be born. Communities pursuing refounding are

searching for entirely new ways of understanding their charism, mission and life in community. There are many prophets who offer new lenses from which to re-imagine the future of religious life and, in doing so, offer an opportunity to transform the consciousness of those on a refounding journey.

Joan Chittister says of religious life that it “must be about seeing what others do not see or saying what others may not say, for whatever reason, at whatever price.” Sandra Schneiders tells us, “Religious are called to be citizens of whatever place they inhabit, children of the cosmos who do not recognize any absolute claims except those of God and hence can transcend the artificial boundaries humans have introduced to divide up land, resources, peoples, and even religion itself.” David Courtourier emphasizes the “relational economy,” based upon a theology of abundance, principles of mutuality and equality, and participation in compassionate collaboration. John Dear’s call to non-violence offers a new lens for the Gospel.

All of these scholars and theologians reframe our theology and worldviews, pouring yesterday’s wine into new wineskins. Each community has its own prophets as well, those on the edge of change who march to the beat of a different drummer. They go about their ministries with tremendous zeal making a profound difference in the lives of those they serve. Sadly, they are often pariahs in their own community, dismissed as disloyal or crazy. But these are the voices of the future offering a new consciousness for refounding.

The invitation of refounding is to explore and reflect upon these new possibilities in order to discover how these might transform your collective consciousness. Listen to the visions that resonate within the hearts of your members, bringing new meaning to your charism and new purpose to your mission. Surely voices such as these offer intimations of the future.

Element 2: Re-appropriation of Your Charism

While deep change transcends the past, it is also rooted in the past, but in a radical new way. Communities on a journey of refounding do not sever all ties with the past. Instead, a refounding community is radically, dangerously and newly committed to their root energy, but with a new twist. With a newly

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transformed consciousness, re-appropriating your charism takes on a whole new meaning.

Rootedness and radicality are a paradox. The key to combining them is not more study of your history books. It is found in appreciating your charism as a reflection of your collective inner voice and not merely the voice of your founder who first proffered this gift to the Church. When your collective voice speaks to the world it carries the voices of all those members living and deceased that helped to shape it, not just your founder. In a very literal sense, it is a gift that keeps on giving, ever changing and evolving.

The rootedness of this inner voice will be found not in the pages of history, but in your authenticity. It is being rooted in knowing, grounded in claiming and made genuine in speaking from the depth of your soul. The radicality will be found in your integrity, your courage to act in accord with this voice to further the reign of God no matter the cost. In this way, re-appropriation of your charism comes down to re-claiming your community’s authentic inner voice while acting with integrity in response to today’s world.

But herein lies a dilemma. What is your collective inner voice saying to our world that is both authentic and manifests integrity as evidenced by your actions? As Ghandi suggests, “We must become the change we want to see in the world.” Who do you say you are to the world and how do you demonstrate this behaviorally? Refounding is an attempt to answer that question and become the change you want to see in the world.

Saying what you believe and acting accordingly as one community is no easy task, especially when members are at odds regarding their most fundamental beliefs. Suffice it to say that community members are not of one mind or heart around many bedrock issues, be it the vows, women's ordination or the Eucharist. Yet it is not the diversity of opinions that is the problem. Rather, it is the inability to work with this diversity directly, overtly and constructively that is the problem. The fear of judgment, reprisal or eruptions of unmanageable conflict makes these issues too hot to handle. So communities table the conversations and agree to disagree. Consequently, the community's inner voice is silenced, its authenticity and integrity destroyed.

Thus, if communities are to journey into refounding they must reclaim their authentic inner voice and act in accord with it. In order to do this, they must deal directly with the very real conflicts that exist around Eucharist, women's ordination, vows, power and authority. They must work through (not around) these conflicts in order to arrive on the other side as one, whole, reconciled, re-authenticated voice supported by their actions. This is what it takes to re-appropriate your charism.

Element 3: Conversion and Reconciliation

A community without pain will not become a refounding community. No one chooses the tumultuous road of deep change without the driving force of deep pain. Pain is the catalyst that pushes us to take a good hard look at ourselves and search for what needs to change. This search, among the faithful, is what invites us back to God and one another. As a result we are brought to the road of conversion and reconciliation, the very crucible of refounding.

Once pain is publically acknowledged communities try a number of methods for dealing with it. Feeling demoralized and frustrated from repeatedly naming their pain, but not getting through it to resolution, some communities attempt to put a moratorium on its further discussion. Some communities may attempt a healing ritual or make renewed promises to love, respect and trust one another. Other communities have tried offering voluntary, weekend workshops to learn how to better communicate. I have not yet seen or

heard that any such efforts have transformed a community steeped in pain.

Communities that wish to heal their brokenness, reconcile their woundedness and experience genuine conversion must go through the same arduous processes as any other individual, couple or group seeking wholeness and healing. There are no shortcuts. Such processes are familiar to all who have experienced conversion and involve several of the following components:

- Turn inward and engage in utterly honest and very painful introspection in order to reclaim truths that have been left unearthed or unintegrated.
- Strip away the layers of defenses that keep our wounds, and the painful truths they conceal, from our own awareness.
- Risk further injury by courageously turning toward others we have long since turned away from, whether because of an injury we caused them or injuries we experienced because of their behavior toward us.
- Cease from blaming others for our pain and take responsibility for our own healing and for companioning others in theirs.
- Put down our need to justify our actions and admit the naked truth of our failures.
- After honest searching, shared exploration, mutual empathy and compassionate understanding, do the work of self-challenge as well as challenging others to stretch and grow into new behaviors.
- Likewise offer and receive expressions of forgiveness, atonement or restitution.
- Only after such direct conversations, try out new behaviors and allow others the same in order to create new patterns, new growth opportunities and new foundations of trust.

Refounding is a journey through the dark night of the soul. It is the most painful and necessary work of all. Nothing less will bring about deep and lasting transformational change. It is the crucible of refounding.

Element 4: Experimentation and Learning

If communities are to keep themselves from becoming fossilized, they must find new ways to evolve. To become a learning community it will be essential that you feel safe with one another. You'll need to feel safe enough to admit that you do not have all the answers, a difficult acknowledgement for educated communities. You'll need to be more tolerant of mistakes and view these more as learning opportunities rather than as failures or flaws. You'll need to have the freedom to fumble in trying out the new. You'll need to let go of your need to look accomplished and professional and become instead neophytes and novices again experimenting with new approaches.

A spirit of experimentation and inquiry along with trial and error learning will be essential. A different approach to mission and ministry will be important. Trying out new community life forms and structures as well as new forms of membership will be important. Walking the talk in a new way and trying out new behavioral patterns that are more congruent with freshly claimed values will also be important. Experimentation with new values and concomitant behavioral patterns will be essential if refounding is to become more than just words.

Element 5: Prophetic Vision

The purpose of refounding is ultimately not for self-service, but for claiming a new vision with new energy to further the reign of God. A new vision fueled and informed from the fires of conversion will acquire profound energy and ownership. Additional buy-in will come from the sweat-equity earned by your collective involvement in your efforts to refound. A new vision, born of your inner voice, will give integrity to the word prophetic.

Prophetic visions will not be found on the shelf of yesterday's prophets, borrowed from a book by acclaimed authors or replicated from the visions of other communities. A great vision is built up over a course of time, through accumulated wisdom and a growing resolve to make it real. It does not come all at once, but acquires its strength by taking one next best step after another. With each step taken, more hope and ownership are engendered. At the end of the day it

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will only be realized if its resonance with the community's soul is matched by the courage of its members to live it.

I believe that if a new vision is going to be prophetic, it will require the full efforts of both leaders and members as partners. Ira Chaleff, in a book entitled *Courageous Followers* offers a helpful, reframed image of leaders and members as partners orbiting around a shared vision. In other words, instead of thinking of leaders as creating a vision and then leading the way while members follow along, think of leaders and members as partners in the enterprise of visioning. In this way they both orbit around the vision, enabling, facilitating and empowering each other on behalf of the vision. To the degree you strengthen the partnership between leaders and members, you will strengthen whatever prophetic vision you claim during your refounding efforts.

THE LABOR OF REFOUNDING: WORKING WITH LIFE/DEATH DYNAMISMS

As we have discovered, despite having recognized the signs of diminishment and destabilization and having made the choice for life anew, most communities will not succeed. While they may wax eloquent about a new vision, most will simply not do the hard work of deep change required in order to bring their words into action. Instead, they will whittle away at the words that once inspired. They will chip away at the potential radicality of these words until only ornamental changes

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are left. They will wordsmith, argue over how and who, and lose sight of the why. They will resist the very change they say is essential with as much vigor as is their will to change. They will choose incremental over deep change and they will die a slow death.

The forces of life and death are continually at play. There are forces that lure us, push us and pull us toward life and there are forces that seduce us and tug us in the opposite direction. How you deal with these forces and exert your free will is the determining factor in your refounding efforts. The five elements of refounding we just reviewed are component parts of a spiraling journey. What moves us through the spiral is the dynamic interplay between these life and death forces.

FORCES OF LIFE THAT LURE US, PUSH US AND PULL US

I do not know of any individual or congregation that can sustain the work of conversion or transformation without the profound *lure* of love. Why else would anyone go through such an ordeal? And never are we so lured as when we, and the relationships that matter to us, are broken. No longer able to stand on our own two feet, we hear more clearly the great love of God. Our yearning grows stronger in response to the invitation: "I am going to lure her and lead her out into the wilderness and speak to her heart" (Hosea 2:16). It is by the luring love of God, your love of community and your yearning to make things whole again that you will gain the strength to step further into the spiral of refounding and journey back home once again.

What *pushes* us are realities we can no longer escape. For most, it is the diminishing numbers, advancing age, and maintenance responsibilities that cast a larger and larger shadow over mission. What pushes most is the fact that funerals outnumber new vocations twenty to one, that the pool of willing and able members available for leadership is shrinking, that you have more building space and property than is utilizable or justifiable. What pushes a community is the brokenness so many have named over and over and the pain that cries out for relief.

What *pulls* us toward life and spurs us on is our faith in the great mystery of life, death and resurrection. We know deep down inside that in order to be made real again, we must let go and let die what needs to die. We must surrender to the ultimate of all tests of faith. In order to choose life we must let go of what no longer gives life. We must let go of the places, ministries and relationships we were once called to embrace because these were life giving, but now no longer are.

FORCES OF DEATH THAT SEDUCE US

Yet, amid all the forces that lure, push and pull us toward life, there are forces of death and doubt that seduce us to choose otherwise. For example, we know that the truth will set us free and we simultaneously hide from it. Sigmund Freud knew this and every therapist since his day has known this. Our defenses and resistance to truths encapsulated in pain are as clever as they are varied.

Besides the anesthetizing armor we carry around, when push comes to shove we have a thousand reasons to justify our avoidance of painful issues and difficult choices. We gravitate toward the path of least resistance. Instead of doing the hard work we know is required, we say, "We're too old, too few, too poor, too busy, too set in our ways." "Too whatever" to change. We wait and postpone until the slippery slope of a weakening resolve carries us to inertia. We start enthusiastically and quickly grow weary and frustrated when more tangible results do not come fast enough nor coincide with our efforts. We want immediate payoff, quick relief. We are seduced by easy solutions. And yet we know that any life-chang-

ing endeavor like refounding is slow in coming and onerous work.

Dancing with the forces of life and death brings us back to the crucible of refounding, back to reconciliation and conversion. There are levels of work here, from personal to interpersonal to systemic. And, in order for refounding to progress, each level will require its own work. Working with these life-giving and death-dealing forces will be the ongoing work of refounding. It is soul-work, the most challenging and rewarding of all.

Our world will forever need refounding people. As refounding people you are the world's evolution in action. Intimations of the future of religious life are already in your being and will be made more manifest by your ongoing work. May the God of surprises and wisdom be with you always on this journey.

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