The formation in the apostolic life is one of the principal concerns in religious communities, even cloistered ones. Though cloistered communities do not have an apostolate which leads them outside the enclosure in active works, nevertheless as is witnessed in the life of someone like the Little Flower, concern for the spiritual conversion of the world must take priority in prayer. If this is true for cloistered communities it is a fortiori even more true for active communities.

A Supernatural Attitude of Love

It is imperative to state at the outset that the apostolate for which religious are forming themselves in not a profession as it is practiced by someone in the world. It has to flow from a supernatural attitude of the love of neighbor. Things like the wearing of a distinctive form of religious dress make this point clearly. The religious habit is not just a form of professional dress or uniform just as the apostolate of religion is not just a profession of work. It is rather a sign that religious serve humanity from the moment of their consecration through living the life of grace in love. A central point in this service is that the apostolate of religious goes beyond their individual work and situates such service in the context of the witness of their community. The face of religious service is the face of the community witness the faithful see. That face is an eschatological sign, for religious life exists: to “call human nature back to its original holiness and bring it to experience on earth the gifts you [God] promise in the world to come” (Preface of Virgins and Religious). Though teaching and nursing are traditional apostolates for religious, every job serving the faithful is important as a witness to charity.

I once knew an 88 year-old Italian lay brother in Rome at our university who was the porter or one who answers the doors and phones. He told me that many of the friars considered him the least important mem-
ber of the community because he was not a teacher and did not have a PhD. Yet he maintained he was the most important because the first experience of the Dominican Order most of the laity had, depended on how he comport ed himself in answering the door and the phones. Sadly some communities have so reduced apostolic witness to human judgement of professional status that the nurses looked down on the teachers, those without PhD looked down on grammar school teachers and many have abandoned religious dress so they could look more like professional men and women. This is the exact opposite of the spirit of service which the apostolate should engender.

**Professionalism is Important**

Of course, one should be well educated in whatever the ministry is one is doing and, if this requires professionalism, this is essential. What is most important is that this does not replace the supernatural love of people. Religious communities seem afflicted sometimes by two extremes. Either one avoids the laity and only does the minimum necessary for the school, hospital or whatever ministry one has, or one spends so much time in the apostolate that one is absent almost completely from the community and often cheats on necessary prayer time.

*The Program for Priestly Formation* rightly points out that for priests, apostolic formation must include cultural awareness, some understanding of religious pluralism and an interest in not just limiting one’s service to the small situation where one serves. Instead this service must be united in spirit to the service of the broader Church of the diocese in particular and the Church in general. Today most pastoral situations in the United States occur in places where one is liable to meet people who have been formed in one way or another in cultures inimical to Catholicism. One must have the personal equilibrium to be a welcoming Gospel presence without approving of the erroneous cultural formation. This requires personal maturity on the part of the pastoral person. Obviously, the other three pillars of formation form an important foundation for this. One must have a good awareness of what the errors and strengths are of contemporary thought, a strategy for answering or encouraging others in the truth, and a spiritual depth which allows a person to maintain one’s equilibrium in the face of challenges to one’s deeply held value system. Much can be accomplished by ordinary human courtesy motivated by divine love. God-invaded personalities can attract people to Christ in the most ordinary of actions.

In times past, religious were often placed in situations like teaching with no training, and simply expected to sink or swim. A good will would satisfy for lack of training. One should remember that those times were characterized by very stable family lives and social and cultural situations which were often clearly defined. Today, such is not the case. The lack of training was not ideal in the past though understandable. Today however, in a hostile culture this is normal not a good idea both for the apostle and for the person served. Some onsite supervision is necessary in addition to religious formation and degrees. Many of us, for example, in the teaching apostolate know that one can be brilliant but unable to control a class or exercise prudence in course expectations. The sad thing is that usually the religious wants to serve with great zeal but is stymied by such a simple thing as lack of preparation or simply not understanding people.

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When one first begins, it is common to become too involved in the apostolate and unable to say no. Here the influence of superiors is important. Also, other religious should help the apostle with advice if requested. Further, it is not the end of the world to make mistakes and fail. The problem becomes when one is too proud to learn from their mistakes. It is the difference between ten years’ experience and one year’s experience ten times as the sergeants used to say in the Army.

**Communal Dimension of the Apostolate**

Finally, one cannot emphasize enough that the apostolate always has a community dimension. Each of us represents larger concerns when we put on the habit. Each of us in the Army.

In the book, *In This House of Brede*, by Rumer Godden about Benedictine nuns in England, the abbey decides to found an abbey in Japan. One of the elderly English nuns is assigned there. When asked if she will miss Brede in Japan her reply is: “I shall not miss Brede. I am Brede.”

Each consecrated religious priest, brother or sister carries the spirit of the Lord encapsulated in the ideas of the founder on each missionary endeavour. He or she is never alone. One has only to read the history of the influence, for example, of religious women on the civilizing of the United States. Even atheists were impressed. Mark Twain used to give money to support the apostolate of the Dominican Sisters of Hawthorne because he was so impressed with their selfless care of those dying of incurable cancer. George Bernard Shaw had a lively friendship with Dame Laurentia McLaughin as Stanbrook Abbey in England and though an atheist wrote once telling the nuns how much he relied on their prayers. “Go and do likewise.”

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