

May 1966

To Hide Behind a Veil: (The Nun Without a Vocation and the Problems of Leaving Religious Life)

Robert J. Bahra

Follow this and additional works at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/lnq>

Recommended Citation

Bahra, Robert J. (1966) "To Hide Behind a Veil: (The Nun Without a Vocation and the Problems of Leaving Religious Life)," *The Linacre Quarterly*: Vol. 33 : No. 2 , Article 10.

Available at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/lnq/vol33/iss2/10>

To Hide Behind A Veil

(THE NUN WITHOUT A VOCATION AND THE PROBLEMS
OF LEAVING RELIGIOUS LIFE)

ROBERT J. BAHRA, M.D.

Take an average young woman from an affluent society, remove her from close family ties, deny her the possession of material goods, discourage overly affectionate relationships, bury her maternal instincts, lessen her freedom of choice in accomplishment, give her a monotonous garb to wear, and request that she follow a never-ending, submissive, and sometimes rigid daily order, and then let us observe. We can be confident that the general laws of psychology will prevail. The young woman will progressively and painfully lose her ability to adequately adapt and conform to this restricted life, simply because we have cleverly blocked so many of her important mental avenues of escape and compromise. All of her basic normal human needs are severely frustrated, and remember, it is only in the satisfaction of wholesome legitimate needs do we obtain our contentment and fulfillment in the natural order of our lives. The end product of such a controlled experience should be obvious; a classic psychoneurotic reaction with its emotional upheavals, somatic malfunctions, disturbances of sleep and appetite, and sundry social maladjustments. In short, she is unhappy and must express it in some way. Our experiment is a success — or is it?

Dr. Bahra is a Catholic psychiatrist in private practice and is also on staff at Mercy Hospital, Ann Arbor, Michigan. He is also a consultant psychiatrist at Mercy College in Detroit.

Have we not in our opening hypothetical experiment accurately described the total sacrifice of the Catholic nun, in accepting and submitting to the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience? Do the psychological laws of predictability suddenly lose their validity when applied to the nun? This would seem inconceivable; virtually all nuns then should ultimately become neurotic. But only the most casual association with them will reveal that the vast majority possess all of the qualities that can be admired in a personality, and are examples of true stability and normalcy. In this seeming contradiction lies the mystery of grace and its magnificent ability, not to substitute for, but rather, to complement nature. From the viewpoint of psychology this then is the real meaning of a religious vocation. It gives to that average but special young woman a very remarkable capacity for adaptation, for to be able to suppress or repress natural human needs throughout a lifetime of sacrifice, without distorting the personality, still remains a very extraordinary psychic phenomenon. It does emphasize, nonetheless, that the nun is extremely vulnerable to the development of an emotional disorder whenever religious life fails to provide a full measure of satisfaction and fulfillment. A general rule applicable to religious life can be established at this point. A nun without a vocation can ultimately

be expected to develop an emotional disorder. The converse, however, need not be true. The presence of an emotional disorder does not necessarily indicate that a nun is without a vocation.

The mature, stable and sincere nun who treasures her vocation obviously should present no problem. It is the emotionally disturbed nun, however, who creates the most challenging, perplexing and trying conflicts a psychiatrist can encounter. The defensive barriers rigidly and promptly erected make proper evaluation and treatment an all too slow and exhaustive process.

Whenever an emotional disorder is suspected, and in spite of serious ethical and moral implications, logic and truth demand that careful consideration be given to the possibility that a vocation to religious life does not, in fact, exist. The attending psychiatrist is at once severely handicapped because he is entering an area traditionally treated in a rather sacrosanct manner. This is an area heretofore reserved for spiritual directors who frequently evaded their responsibility to young discontented nuns through the use of sanguine platitudes that solved nothing and postponed everything. Perhaps it may be of interest to explore some of the hidden reasons for the difficulties encountered, because the disturbed nun does indeed hide behind her veil.

A young woman who is doubtful about her decision to enter religious life usually seeks the advice of her spiritual director or confessor. The very unfortunate and inappropriate direction habitually given to "try it

for awhile" is unfair to the young woman and to the religious community. There is a very important truth to be learned in this matter. The more unstable and maladjusted an applicant is, the less likelihood for her to leave once she has entered. There are two major reasons for this. In the first place, it is a far less traumatic for her to stay, than to face the prospect of returning to the source of her original problems. In addition, she frequently harbors undue apprehension that leaving will cause humiliation and embarrassment to herself and to her family. Any attempt to uncover this conflict is met with the impregnable defense of denial. She can maintain the facade of commitment until final profession, and then forevermore remain a thorn in the side of her superior or the community. Her unhappiness can subtly permeate an entire convent or an entire classroom. In the convent, she becomes a disturbing nucleus from which the other nuns cannot escape, and in the classroom, she can act out her interior miseries on unsuspecting or bewildered children. Once final vows are taken, the community is hampered severely in its ability to effect any change. There are instances, although few in number, when one wonders about the wisdom of final profession except after a much longer proven period of time.

An unhappy or unstable young woman may enter religious life for many improper motives, and she is often partially or totally unaware of their existence or of their undermining influence. A mistress of novices

should be chosen for her maturity and wisdom in knowing that such reasons do exist, and astute enough to recognize them. The following are commonly uncovered:

1. She is basically maladjusted and wants to escape from the demands and responsibilities of her life. This can be detected from a more accurate historical account of her pre-entrance behavior. Such information is often lacking or haphazardly obtained.
2. She wants to compensate for inappropriate guilt which she harbors because of a previous wrong committed. Her religious life then becomes a punitive experience. She is masochistic indeed.
3. She seeks a "secure" refuge because of her own insecurity or feelings of inadequacy.
4. She wants to run from an unhappy or traumatic home situation.
5. She is chronically frustrated and very ambivalent about what she really wants to do in life.
6. She submits to the naive belief that she is entering a "peaceful" existence where sacrifice is always pleasant.
7. Scrupulosity indicates her approach to morality. A scrupulous young woman should never be permitted to take final vows.
8. She is compromising for an unhappy or broken love affair.
9. She has been improperly "pushed" by another nun, or member of her own family, at

an age when she is still unaware of what life has to offer in the way of a choice. Entrance into religious life while still in the early teens is mentioned only to be absolutely condemned.

The suspected presence of any such motivating urges should precipitate a most careful evaluation, and always before final vows are taken.

Once final vows are taken the complexity of our problem is at times almost insurmountable. When many years pass, and the nun begins to doubt the existence of a vocation, she is literally trapped. This is true because she is totally unprepared to meet the changing lay world and its economic demands. To encourage leaving at this time would render her helpless. To the young nun, however, the difficulty appears to arise, in part, from her exposure to many religious life concepts that seem to be treated as absolutes. They represent the end product of misapplied or misunderstood spirituality perpetuated through the years. Notable among the very many are three commonly believed:

1. Final profession automatically and perpetually confers the grace of a vocation.

A vocation to religious life does not carry the indelible mark of a sacrament. It is permanent only so long as the nun wills it to be so. Vocations can be and are lost. A few spiritual writers have disputed this, but observational experience teaches that it is a very real possibility. At times, nuns are

complacent and seem oblivious to the fact that grace is not a permanent gift, it must be nurtured if it is to grow. A weakened vocation then, in addition to the absence of one, can start the vicious cycle of events leading to disturbances. Once again, it is due to lack of fulfillment and the secondary frustrations involved.

2. Thoughts of leaving religious life are almost always diabolically inspired.

This notion virtually nullifies any attempt at exploration because of the profound guilt and self condemnation that it begets. More often than once, any questions in the area of vocations have emitted feelings indicative of seeming cooperation with the devil.

3. A nun leaving religious life is in great danger of losing the salvation of her soul.

A more damaging concept cannot be conceived, and it represents an almost impossible hurdle. It was apparently developed as a final argument to eliminate persistent doubt. When the doubt was not dispelled, then confusion was certainly added to the problem. If sanctification is the ultimate goal in the life of the nun, then the emotionally disturbed nun is severely crippled in her efforts. Of necessity, she becomes autistic, and autism leads to neglect and indifference. She

will be left empty and unhappy, and is unable to grow as a total person. It would seem reasonable to assume that she can be in greater danger of losing her soul in the convent than out of it.

Such inbred and less than truthful ideas are difficult to face and resolve and cause smoldering guilt and repressed anxiety. A young nun may have strong urges to leave because she recognizes or suspects a mistake in entering, but will be overwhelmed by the anxiety of her decision and trench into her perpetual misery. Then too, pity the young women who express thoughts of leaving, for all too often, she becomes aware of an aloofness reminiscent of the days of leprosy. At this time in her life when charity is most needed, it may be the least given. Would it not be better to consider that whatever time is spent in religious life represents a meaningful investment? Any young woman takes from this experience a wisdom that can well sustain her in later life, and it should be so treated by all concerned, especially her own family. She will be a better wife, a better mother or simply a better woman.

One canonical provision can be of immense help both diagnostically and therapeutically, but unfortunately is almost unknown and unused. It is the privilege of exclaustation. It simply means a nun can request a limited time leave from religious life, and still return to her previous full status. Indiscriminately used it obviously can create havoc in a community. But

with a very select few, it does provide them with an opportunity to return to the lay world and test their own motives once again. For those who are immature, it can produce a period of significant growth making them much more content and fulfilled when they return. It is interesting to note that very few of the nuns who exclaustate ever return to religious life again. We can agree with religious communities, however, in their belief that in most cases, separation should be total and permanent.

The entire problem of entering and leaving religious life needs an honest, unbiased reappraisal. It demands a much more intensive screening of those entering and a less traumatic way for those leaving. The stigma of leaving must be erased.

SOME FINAL THOUGHTS

The sacrifice of a contemporary nun is far more than that of her counterpart of fifty years ago. Her vows of poverty, chastity and obedience demand a type of self-immolation that would put her predecessor to shame. This is true simply because the society which she leaves has so much more to offer in a material way, and her natural human needs are so much easier to

satisfy. The demands placed on the nun in her work are at times overwhelming, and little realized or appreciated by the laity. This is particularly true of the teaching nun who carries the heavy burden of an overcrowded classroom and an inflexible convent schedule, and has precious little time for her own spiritual pursuits, or even for her own moments of relaxation. The feverish "heresy of activity" is certainly evident in convent life. Is love measured only by work? Then too, the vows of poverty and obedience are occasionally carried to archaic extremes. Although she is human, and has human needs, little attempt has been made to find suitable and wholesome outlets so that her own personality can express itself in a more personal or individual way. Too often, superiors develop an unconscious need to mold all of the young nuns under them after their own image and likeness, or their own concept of personality behavior. If grace works through nature, then nature should not be needlessly thwarted. One can be certain that emotional disorders among religious have increased, and will continue to increase. The life of the religious may very well need reexamination in the light of our contemporary culture and our knowledge of psychological laws.