

Religious Life

CROSSROADS: MYSTICS & PROPHETS

Pat Montgomery, Ph.D., director of associates for the Sisters of Divine Providence

It is no secret that religious congregations of women face a decline in numbers. We are told by sisters themselves and we even hear it on the evening news: the median age is 74 in most orders. Doom and gloom prevails. But now comes Sister Amy Hereford's book, *Religious Life at the Crossroads, A School For Mystics and Prophets*, and a veil is lifted.

In crisp, concise phrasing, she guides us to the mountaintop of historical perspective where we can see clearly how religious life began and how it changed and adapted throughout the ages. Sister Amy takes us from the Desert Movement to Monasticism, to Apostolic Orders, to the forms of consecrated life that are emerging today.

Times change. People's needs change. Focal points of the Church's teachings change. Structures and leadership change. But through it all, religious life maintains one unvarying constant: it is a life radically committed to living the Gospel and bringing the love of God to new frontiers.

One key element of religious life is community. Sister Amy devotes a chapter to a summary of the work of four twentieth-century visionaries: Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Brother Roger of Taizé, Dorothy Day and Jean Vanier. Each of the communities that they established contain fundamentals which today's evolving communities can adopt.

This book speaks volumes to anyone who wants to learn the what and the wherefore of vowed religious life. But most importantly, it describes and defines the why of religious life. It is a school for mystics and prophets. No, not some esoteric others that those words seem to connote, but any person who seeks to have, in Karl Rahner's words, a "genuine experience of God emerging from the very heart of our existence." The Christian of the future, Rahner said, "will be a mystic or he will not exist at all" (*Theological Investigations*, vol. 20, Concern for the Church New York: Crossroad, 1981).

As an associate of a religious congregation of women, I would like to have seen a more detailed account of the role that associates (also called co-members, Third Order members, etc.) play in emerging communities. Perhaps in her next book. Meanwhile, I am enlivened by the vitality and hope that this book foretells.

