

## The Quest of Women Religious

**Rekha Chennattu, RA**

*Dept of Scripture, JDV, Pune*

The Second Vatican Council speaks of religious as "men and women who set out to follow Christ with greater liberty" (*Perfectae Caritatis* 1). Religious life, then, is meant to foster greater freedom in their life and mission. However, it has been observed by some that the life and mission of women religious is being hampered by an out-dated spirituality, unnecessary rules and inappropriate structures. It is against this background that I chose to conduct a small study. My plan was to investigate the quest and experiences of women religious in the areas of freedom, community living, spirituality etc. The survey was conducted during the first four months of 1999.\*

### I. Profile of the Sample

The sample consists of all the Sisters, either working or studying, in the diocese of Pune. Of the total of 309 questionnaires sent out, 227 responses were returned, which makes the response rate 73.5%. The respondents belong to more than 50 congregations of women religious. Of the total respondents, 46.6% were from Kerala, 25.1% from Maharashtra, 13.2% from Karnataka, 3.7% Goa, 2.7% from Tamil Nadu, 2.3% from Gujarat, and the rest, 6.5%, were from other states.

The respondents included both Junior (temporarily professed) and Senior

(finally professed) Sisters. From the point of view of age, nearly 32.6% were 30 or below 30 years old, 36.6% were between 31-49, and 30.8% were 50 or above. The educational level of the respondents was high. In fact, the majority of them (62.2%) were graduates or post-graduates. Of the total respondents, 53.2% had some sort of formal training in theology.

Almost all of them (97.6%) were engaged in some apostolic activity. One-third of the respondents were teachers. Nearly 17% of the respondents were students. Others were engaged in social work (9%), formation (8.1%), administration (6.2%) and nursing (5.2%) etc.

### II. Findings

In the questionnaire, that was used for this study, different areas or dimensions of religious life were grouped together under four headings: 1) Priorities in Religious Life, 2) Perception of Self: Experiences and Attitudes, 3) Perception of Other Sisters, and 4) Perception of the Superiors. We shall now look at the findings of each section separately.

#### 1. Priorities in Religious Life

To assess the priorities of women religious, the respondents were asked

\* I would like to take this opportunity to place on record my grateful thanks to all those who helped me in this study.

to rate the following possible priorities on a four-point scale of importance, ranging from “very important” to “not at all important”.

**Table: 1**

Very important = 4; Important = 3; Not so important = 2; Not at all important = 1

Priorities in Religious Life	4	3	2	1
1. Attending community spiritual exercises regularly.	40.7	51.8	6.6	0.9
2. Being informed of events in the country/ world.	58.0	36.2	4.9	0.9
3. Imitating the life of the Founder or the Foundress.	31.1	47.6	18.7	2.7
4. Being innovative in interpreting the Charism of the Congregation.	57.1	36.5	4.1	2.3
5. Speaking one’s mind frankly even if it leads to conflict in the community.	48.0	37.2	12.1	2.7
6. Being involved in the lives of the people in the neighbourhood.	46.6	46.2	6.3	0.9
7. Being first and foremost a woman of prayer.	82.3	14.6	2.7	0.4
8. Being faithful to the teaching of the Church.	46.0	40.7	13.3	0.0

A quick glance at Table 1 reveals that the respondents have given the top priority to being a woman of prayer. In fact, an overwhelming majority, 82.3% of the respondents, consider ‘being first and foremost a woman of prayer’ very important for their religious life. It is not very clear what they mean by being a woman of prayer. However, only 40.7% of the respondents hold the view that ‘attending community spiritual exercises regularly’ is very important. It would seem that for some Sisters being a woman of prayer means more than

regular participation in common spiritual exercises.

It is noteworthy that 57.1% think that ‘being innovative in interpreting the charism’ is very important. It is also significant that only less than 7% feel that this is not so important. In contrast, only 31.1% believe that ‘imitating the life of the Founder or the Foundress’ is very important. In fact, for more than 21% this is not so important. Almost 50% of the respondents consider ‘being involved in the lives of the people in the neighbourhood’ very important. It is also

remarkable that only about 7% think that this is not so important. Closely connected with this is the fact that 58% of the respondents regard it as very important to be ‘informed of events in the country/world’. Here again only a small minority of less than 6% look upon this as not so important.

Traditionally, most religious congregations laid stress on *imitating* their Founder/Foundress. They also inculcated in the Sisters the value of *serving people through institutional apostolate*. In this context, it is interesting to note that the majority of the respondents give high priority to *innovativeness in interpreting* the charism and almost half of the respondents regard it as very important to be *involved in the lives of the people*.

It is rather surprising that for 48% of the respondents it is very important to ‘speak one’s mind frankly even if it

leads to conflict in the community’. Another 37% regard it as important. And only less than 15% think it is not so important. This is remarkable. One would have thought that many religious would subscribe to the principle of “peace at any price”. But here Sisters are prepared to take the risk of causing a conflict in the community by being forthright in expressing their opinions.

## 2. Perception of Self: Experiences and Attitudes

The Table below reveals the self perception of women religious in terms of their experiences, attitudes and opinions regarding the various areas of their life: inner freedom, participation in the decision-making process, preferences in apostolate, community living and the demands of the apostolate, financial independence and their experience of working for the Church.

Table: 2

Perception of Self: Experiences and Attitudes	True	False	Not Sure
1. I am happy to accept whatever assignment is given to me irrespective of my likes and dislikes.	51.1	33.9	14.9
2. I prefer to work in a non-formal set-up.	53.2	34.5	12.3
3. I feel guilty when I cannot be regular for the community prayers.	48.9	43.6	7.6
4. I feel free to be myself in the community.	69.9	21.7	8.4
5. I experience a conflict between the demands of my apostolate and my community life.	41.4	45.9	12.7
6. I get enough money for my legitimate needs.	84.9	10.6	4.6
7. I feel that Church institutions which employ women religious often do not remunerate them justly.	60.5	10.9	28.6
8. I am not for the ordination of women in the Church.	35.4	54.0	10.6

Table 2 shows that 69.9% of the respondents feel free to be themselves in the community. However, 48.9% say that they feel guilty when they cannot be regular for the community prayers. Then the question arises: what does it mean to feel free to be oneself in the community? All the same, it is significant that 43.6% do not feel guilty, especially as there is a lot of insistence in many religious congregations on regular attendance at community prayers.

More than half of the respondents prefer to work in a non-formal set-up. This probably ties up with what they have said about the importance of being involved in the lives of the people. Could it also be connected with their emphasis on being innovative in interpreting the charism? One should not, however, overlook the fact that one-third of the respondents (34.5%) do not prefer to work in a non-formal set-up.

It is a curious phenomenon that 51.1% of the respondents say 'I am ready to accept whatever assignment is given to them irrespective of their likes and dislikes'. It is not clear as to what it points to. Does it reveal their understanding of the vow of obedience as unquestioning acceptance of the decisions of the superior? In this day and age, when there is so much talk about dialogue, personal responsibility etc., do they not expect that the superiors would dialogue with them before giving them an assignment.

45.9% of the respondents do not experience a conflict between the demands of their apostolate and their community life. This is certainly a positive development since a large number of Sisters are able to find a balance between their apostolic involvement and community life. But then 41.4% do experience a conflict. Is it perhaps due to a lack of clarity with regard to the relative importance of ministry and community in the life of a religious?

60.5% of the respondents state that Church institutions which employ women religious often do not remunerate them justly. We do not know how widespread this unjust practice is. All the same, the leaders of the Church have to look into this and take steps to ensure that women religious receive a just remuneration for their work.

### **3. Perceptions of Other Sisters**

How do our respondents perceive other Sisters with whom they have lived or live in terms of their freedom and autonomy, responsibility, understanding of spirituality, training and competency? In an attempt to find out their perceptions the respondents were given the following impressions about women religious; and they were asked to indicate whether these apply to Most, Many, Some, or A Few/None of the Sisters with whom they have lived or live.

**Table: 3**

<b>Sisters with whom I lived or live:</b>	<b>Most</b>	<b>Many</b>	<b>Some</b>	<b>A few None</b>
1. Are too dependent on superiors.	16.4	34.5	39.8	9.3
2. Show signs of true inner freedom.	8.0	23.0	53.1	15.9
3. Take responsibility for their life.	18.3	35.8	39.0	6.9
4. Tend to equate the quality of spiritual life with the practice of external spiritual exercises.	15.3	43.7	32.0	9.0
5. Tend to interpret rules rigidly.	11.8	28.2	48.2	11.8
6. Do not have sufficient intellectual training.	14.3	37.5	31.3	17.0
7. Prefer to go along with others rather than assert their own convictions.	19.6	44.2	25.9	10.3
8. Are too depended on priests.	8.1	28.8	36.0	27.0
9. Are competent in what they do.	11.2	35.0	44.4	9.4

Nearly two-thirds of the respondents (60%) say that only some or a few of the Sisters tend to interpret rules rigidly. However, the majority (69%) of the respondents are of the opinion that only some or a few Sisters with whom they have lived or live show signs of true inner freedom. And 63.8% state that the Sisters prefer to go along with others rather than assert their own convictions in the community. In addition, more than half of the respondents (50.9%) think that many of the Sisters are too dependent on superiors. 45.9% state that only some or a few of the Sisters take responsibility for their life. If this is true, then a large number of Sisters do not show that they have become adult women who experience genuine freedom, who have the courage to hold their own convictions and who take respon-

sibility for their life. Maybe, religious life has not been a liberating and growth-promoting experience for them.

59% of the respondents are of the opinion that many Sisters tend to equate the quality of spiritual life with the practice of external spiritual exercises. Is this perhaps the result of the prevalence of an out-dated spirituality among women religious? More than half of the respondents hold that Sisters do not have sufficient intellectual training. 53.8% are of the opinion that only some of the Sisters are competent in what they do. This may point to a lack of adequate formation, both religious and professional.

#### **4. Perceptions of the Superiors**

The superiors play an important role in the animation of the communities of women religious. Let us now examine

the way our respondents perceive their superiors. The respondents were provided with some statements about the superiors and were asked to indicate

whether they apply to Most, Many, Some, A few/None of the superiors they had/have.

**Table: 4**

The superiors I have known were/are	Most	many	Some	A few None
1. Impartial in their exercise of authority.	12.9	26.3	46.9	13.8
2. Supportive of the new initiatives taken by the members of the community.	16.8	42.0	34.5	6.6
3. Overly-strict with regard to the rules in the community.	12.4	27.9	49.1	10.6
4. Understanding even when Sisters made/ make mistakes.	18.6	37.2	35.0	9.3
5. Promoting participation in the decision making process.	20.0	36.9	35.6	7.6
6. Broad-minded in their approach.	15.1	32.9	41.8	10.2

As Table 4 shows, the perceptions of the Sisters are both positive and negative. They believe that the majority of superiors are not overly strict with regard to the rules in the community. They also find that superiors are by and large supportive of the new initiatives taken by the members of the community. Almost 57% of the respondents think that many superiors promote participation of the members of the community in the decision-making process. More than half of the respondents feel that many of the superiors are ‘understanding even when Sisters make mistakes.’ However, more than 60% of the respondents are of the opinion that only some or a few of the superiors are “impartial.” And almost half of the respondents do not think that

many superiors are broad-minded in their approach. In this connection, it is probably significant that 43.2% of the respondents do not feel that many superiors promote participation in the decision making process.

The picture of the superior that emerges from these findings is not very flattering. In fact, it should be a matter of great concern for all women religious that the majority of the superiors do not appear to be “impartial”, to be women who exercise authority with justice and fairness. Many superiors are also seen to be lacking in understanding and broadmindedness. All this raises the question of the selection, appointment and training of the superiors.

### III. Final Comments

There is something quite puzzling in these findings. While 69.9% of the respondents say that they feel free to be themselves in the community, 69% of the respondents are of the opinion that only some Sisters show signs of inner freedom. How do you explain this? Could it be that the majority of the respondents take the stance: "I am OK, You are not OK"? Or is it that the respondents would like to claim that they are really free while in actual fact the majority of the Sisters do not experience inner freedom? It may well be that religious life as it is understood and lived today is not a liberating experience for many women religious.

It is difficult to know how the respondents understand spirituality. It seems that the majority of the Sisters tend to equate spirituality with fidelity to common exercises of piety. One wonders if this is the way many of them would understand the expression, 'being a woman of prayer'. Is this perhaps a pointer to the absence among women

religious of a search for a new, life-giving spirituality which would impel them to a radical commitment to the service of our people.

It may well be that part of the problem in religious life today is the lack of careful selection and adequate formation of young people. Religious life cannot nurture adult women who are innerly free and responsible if those who are admitted to religious life are really unfit. Hence the need for a strict selection of the candidates. It is also necessary to design and implement an integrated and innovative programme of formation.

This is too small a study to tell us anything definitive about the quality of life among women religious in the whole of India. All the same, it is perhaps significant that in the opinion of the respondents of this survey religious life has not been life-giving and growth-promoting for many Sisters. A national survey of the life and ministry of women religious might give new insights into the situation of women religious in India today.