

## **Religious Life in a Secularised World**

**Presentation for the meeting of the European Provincial Councils of the Marist Brothers,**

**Soesterberg, 12-15 October 2006.**

### **Introduction**

Recently, in the 'laudatio' at the awarding of a doctoral degree at the Radboud University in Nijmegen, Professor Hans van der Ven called European society a very secularised one. Among the secularised European countries he identified the Netherlands and the Scandinavian countries as the most secularised nations in the world. What do we mean, in fact, when we use the term *secularisation* for European or for Dutch society?

The term *secularisation* is widely used, and it is interpreted and understood in many different ways. Its use suggests a clarity that is usually not there. I will try to identify the meanings and processes in which I encounter the term and the phenomenon. Then I will explain the place of the Mystery of God in this secularisation, after which I will address religious life within the secularised society and recent developments within religious life. I will ask what the task or the challenge of religious life may be in this secularised society. Of course, I do this as someone who is very much involved in the Conference of Dutch Religious and who tries to live the life of a Carmelite, which may colour my description and understanding.

### **Secularisation: Several Meanings and Simultaneous Processes**

It is commonly assumed that the word *secularisation* was first used as a technical term in the sense of the appropriation of Church property, generally with the negative connotation of illegitimate operations. During the negotiations in the context of the Westphalia Peace Treaty the question arose of how the Elector of Brandenburg could be compensated for the loss of his domains in Sweden. One possible solution was to offer him domains that, until then, had been under Church supervision. For this appropriation of Church property the veiled term *secularisation* was used. In later times, it was often used to describe the confiscation of monastic or Church goods by the state. But the use of the term *secularisation* in Canon Law dates further back. There, it is used to describe the switch someone makes from a regular to a secular order, in other words, when a monk becomes a secular priest.

A religious-sociological meaning of the word *secularisation* is explained in the book *The homeless mind: modernization and consciousness* (1977) by Peter Ludwig Berger, Brigitte Berger and Hansfried Kellner. The authors offer a fascinating description of how our modern society has broken up into various social environments: compartments that exist independently from each other. For example, there is the environment of the bureaucracy and the administration, the environment of work and labour, the school environment, the political

environment and the family environment. The Modern person commutes between these different environments every day. The umbrella function of religion as the link between them that places them in a meaningful context, has disappeared. There is no heavenly canopy anymore. The connection between our existence and its meaning that religion used to provide no longer exists. Man does not have a home anymore. He has become a 'homeless mind', seeking his way between the different environments in which he finds himself every day. For spirituality, this particular meaning of *secularisation* has far-reaching consequences. The self-evidence of religion and, more importantly, the self-evidence of God no longer exists. Modern man has become a seeker, homeless in the many environments he enters.

In relation to the process of the fragmentation of the heavenly canopy there are several other processes that are referred to with the term *secularisation*. For instance, I have heard people say that religion is a private matter. Secularisation is the privatisation of religion. As far as I am concerned, referring religion into the private sphere dismantles the religious experience people have and robs it of the public and ethical dimension that is certainly also part of religion.

Running parallel to the process of the privatisation of religion is the process of de-traditionalisation. The roots of our own religious persuasion are unknown to us. In recent years, the media have made a sport out of illustrating this de-traditionalisation with polls and street interviews around the major Christian holidays. 'Easter is when the furniture shops are open on Monday.'

Still, there is a need for a deepening and for a stronger sense of meaning. People keep searching. Some of them will create their own package by collecting different aspects from various religious and spiritual traditions, so much so that the term 'religious supermarket' has been coined. In light of this development I wonder what impact the felt presence of the major religious traditions in our society with a rich spiritual content – such as Christianity, Islam and Judaism – will have in the long term.

*Secularisation* may also refer to the evaporation of the institutions of the Church. Annual figures show that an ever decreasing number of people feel connected with the Church institutions in their traditional setting. Still, this evaporation of the Church does not imply a decrease of spirituality and compassion per se. The increase of religious lay movements in our country alone clearly shows that such an equation would be a misconception.

## **Underlying Principles and their Limits**

I recognise the following underlying principles of the processes I have identified: an experience of identity in which man sees himself as autonomous, the principle of 'makeability', and the primacy of rationality and usefulness.

Modern man thinks of himself as an autonomous being. In itself, this is not a bad starting point. The notion of autonomy has led to many great things. For example, it has given us democratic government and our sense of responsibility. Also, the emancipation of oppressed groups and our right to self-fulfilment are directly related to the principle of autonomy.

The principle of makeability has laid the foundation for science and technical knowledge. We owe our progress and technical facilities to it. Central heating, television and computers are things we would not want to miss.

The principle of rationality, then, gives us the ability to judge for ourselves, to do scientific research and to evaluate.

At the same time, these underlying principles of secularisation have their limits too. To name them in reverse order, I am aware of limits of the primacy of rationality and usefulness when I feel annoyance upon hearing sentences such as, 'They still believe' or 'They still attend Church'. It is particularly the word 'still' that irritates me. It sounds as if such silly things as spirituality and religiosity have long been superseded by rationality and usefulness. Intelligent people do not do such things anymore. At the same time, I also perceive such remarks as a mix-up of categories. Affection is something entirely different from usefulness or effectiveness. It is my intuition that praying should be categorised under affection. Therefore, praying won't help, but that does not mean that it should not be done. People love each other and they love God, and reasons of usefulness are hardly ever involved in this. Apparently, usefulness and rationality are not the only categories. Worse still, rationality and usefulness alone threaten to make our world one-dimensional. The Mystery is fading.

The notion of makeability reaches its limits when we are confronted with the finiteness of our existence. Sickness and death make us realise that not everything is makeable. We have not made or created ourselves. We have been given to each other in our existence. Sometimes, our interfering with nature through bio-industry and bio-technology, our interfering with heredity, seem to have caused more problems than they have solved. The confrontation with the suffering of another human being – when there is nothing to end this suffering – requires compassion, presence and an inner involvement more than anything else.

Reading the Gospels has taught me that it is not autonomy alone that defines identity. Various processes of identity formation may take place. For lack of a better word I will call this a *relational identity*. I am offered a relational identity, just like that, freely, out of love. Someone wants to have something to do with me. At the beginning of the Synoptic Gospels, a

voice from heaven says, 'You are my beloved Son. I love you.' Perhaps that same sentence was said to each of us. Perhaps we have all been offered a place where we naturally feel at home with God. This does not imply that the questions and difficulties of our existence, our struggles and battles disappear; but there is a place we can come home to. In the relationship offered to us by God we can stand up and be who we are: beloved sons and daughters of God. We can accept God's offer of love and live by it. Growing into this relational identity is a lifelong task. Only at the end of the Gospels does the voice from heaven receive its answer in Jesus' prayer: 'Abba, Father.'

### **The Mystery of God, Present and Absent**

The mystery of God is slipping away from us, from our rationality and our understanding of makeability. At the same time, however, it thrusts itself upon us. This is how I articulate God's reality. The Mystery presents itself as something outside of us, something sacred, something we cannot grasp. As we are confronted with aspects of it, the endless, profound, incomprehensible Mystery urges itself on us. It will inevitably continue to confront people with questions about the meaning of it all, about the reasons behind it all, about the sense of the things that happen and the things that people do. It infringes on what is familiar. It infringes on the reality that people keep under control.

Although we live in a society where people think they are autonomous, consider rationality of paramount importance and see makeability as their vision, people also refuse, based on their experiences, to live one-dimensional lives. Even if they do not define the mystery that moves them, they do live their lives suspecting and expecting the secret that can fill their lives. The posters for the 2006 Youth Day – a Dutch annual mega-event organised by the Evangelical Broadcasting Corporation – invite young people with the text, 'Enter the Mystery'. In a conversation between the French philosopher Régis Debray and the French theologian Claude Geffré, the former observes, 'Human groups, communities, need something outside themselves around which they can unite: a dream for the future, a dreamed origin. This something lives in society in the form of a symbol, of something sacred.' Theologian Claude Geffré recognises in the current developments new opportunities for the true religion. He says, 'There is an exodus from religious institutions. What happens after that? That which makes the religious experience so special emerges now of all times, now that the religion of the religious institutes has no function anymore. A "religion in a different way" is emerging. In our day and age, the heart of what religion is revealed, namely intimacy with God. And this intimacy is "freely given". People increasingly experience that God is not just transcendent (and overwhelming) but also a "Subjectivity". Associations with God are about love, friendship and covenant, not about subordination and dominance. Such associations with God add to our being human. This offers some hope for "this crazy world of ours".'

If that suspicion and that expectation of the secret are directed at God, even if fear stops us from actually naming it, then we arrive at the motives of religious desire. I have learned to recognise this religious desire as the heart of prayer. It is not the set times nor the rituals and words – important though they are – that determine the movement of our prayer, but the desire to reach for that which is hidden. In religious life great energy is put into this prayer and this desire. Religious life is a life in expectation. Expectation is desire and trust at the same time. ‘Expectation does not deny the darkness of the present; it does not fix the future in a single direction; still, it anticipates a new, unexpected possibility. It does not argue away the light side of the present; it does not demand that this light side continue in the future; still, it anticipates the Future that will be fulfilling’, says Frans Andriessen [a Dutch former Minister of Finance of the Catholic People’s Party]. To expect is to acknowledge the present and to anticipate the future. To pray is to reach out to Him who comes towards us. To pray is to keep the void open to Him who can truly fill it with His Presence. Therefore, to pray is also to add our voice to the prayer of the suffering; to voice the complaints and the calls of all those who know the void and a sense of loss, who feel the loneliness of our society, who suffer from the coldness among people, who are uprooted and marginalized. To pray is to feel solidarity with those who seek traces of the divine in their existence.

### **Vocation, a divine intervention in human life**

Vocation is the experience that God intervenes in our lives and steers our life perspective by placing it in a life devoted to Him. To recognise this vocation, to understand the divine intervention, is not an easy thing, especially not for young people today. It requires illumination and discernment. It requires appropriate guidance. And it also requires mature decision-making. To respond to God’s intervention in life – i.e., to make profession – is a new experience every day, as it implies that we say ‘yes’ on the basis of the concrete circumstances of that particular moment. In doing so, we often stem the tide of public opinion and dominant culture. Of course, it is our own responsibility to decide what to do with our vocation. But this is just one aspect of the story. Together, we are all responsible for the realisation of our personal vocation and of the vocation and the mission of the order, of the religious Institute. Living in community is the exercise that will help us to accept the other person as completely different, as a gift to ourselves so that we can be brothers and sisters.

Abbeys and communities are prayerful, contemplative and active groups of people in a world in which God is not a matter of course anymore. It is my conviction that contemplation leads to actions and that action without contemplation have a tendency to turn into activism. People who are trying to find God in today’s secularised world want their desire to be the foundation of their lives; they want to live in expectation and in trust. The creativity that is required for this life hardly ever seems to come from Church institutions anymore. We need places where

the heart starts to burn. I think it is important that we consider our charism and our mission as essential elements in today's society and Church.

The great religious traditions definitely have a message for the current secularised society. This is evident. For many people, abbeys and monasteries are a haven of hospitality. People are looking for that hospitality, where they are accepted for who they are, where they are worthy as persons. People are looking for peace, quiet, simplicity and contemplation, for places where they can be in touch with their desire to connect with the divine mystery. People are looking for moments of silence, contemplation and prayer in order to withdraw from the bustle of society. They feel at home in a place where they can keep their desire for God open and nurture it, where the prayerful and contemplative dimension of their existence can be addressed and shaped, where contemplation invites them to make an effort, and where the effort is not stripped of its contemplative dimension.

### **The Mystery presents itself and invites us to take action**

By their vocation, religious are invited to have and deepen a relationship with this divine mystery, in a world that dreams of makeability and autonomy, in a society that is secularised to the bone. As I see it, this means that we must courageously, enthusiastically, faithfully and openly foster our relationship with the Mystery and with the fact that, in the depth of our being, we have no answers to essential questions and issues. It also means that it is important to enter into this relationship with the Mystery where there is room for intimacy with God; where the Mystery is accepted as a significant guideline and orientation in life. To enter into that relationship with the Mystery implies that we have no answers in the depth of our being; it also indicates that we realise that it is precisely our trusting and surrendering to the Mystery, and our surrendering to the intimacy with God that holds the power of religious life: to reveal the divine mystery with every effort and with full commitment and in any circumstance. As I see it, this requires honesty and authenticity.

There is another aspect that is important in this context. It is no longer self-evident that religious are present in the political arena. This has given them the opportunity to focus on the necessary 're-sourcing' of their spirituality and their charism. It has given religious institutes the opportunity to focus, within their own ranks, on the limits and restrictions that keep emerging due to the increase of their ageing membership and their reduced administrative powers. Their withdrawal from the public domain has another consequence as well. Religious institutes are no longer considered relevant organisations that embody important values in our society and contribute significant values to the society of tomorrow. The fact that the presence of religious in the public domain is not self-evident anymore puts them in a new situation. As religious institutes, we are forced – if we want to consider our tradition, our spirituality and our charism a contribution to the society of tomorrow – to give up our modest attitude and to

consciously demand attention to the values, the animation and the inspiration on which we have founded our lives. Religious institutes are asked to be aware of the fact that we carry with us a long tradition that can be invaluable for generations to come. It can make a significant contribution to society, where, occasionally, the realisation strikes us that makeability is not everything, and where it becomes visible that individualism may have a considerable negative impact on social life and the public spirit. As religious institutes, we are responsible for introducing and addressing values we hold dear to the public debate and to the public domain. This is a responsibility that religious institutes should take up and shape. In the very phase where there are ever more limits and restrictions we must re-learn to keep ourselves abreast of political and social developments, to be involved in the public debate and to be present in a meaningful way in our secularised society, where it is not the public spirit but individualism that predominates.

### **The topicality of religious life**

The values that have always added meaning to the lives of religious - their concern and passion for God and people, their attention to study and reflection in terms of spiritual life, their call for attention to justice, peace and the integrity of Creation – are all aspects that continue to be relevant. As religious institutes, we are required to do our best to bring these significant values to the public attention. I think it is important to realise that there is a growing number of allies and that there should be dialogue about this in the public domain. It seems to me that religious should create opportunities for this. As I see it, they should not disappear from the public domain. True, they will have to be present in a different way than before. This presents a challenge for us all. It is not only our own future that is at stake here but also that of values that are, and will continue to be, worthwhile for society.

The men and women who have founded religious orders and congregations broke new ground, from their passion for God and people, for the benefit of the needy and the poor. In many cases, rules and structures came into existence with the passage of time, which may have obscured the original commitment and passion. Through ‘re-sourcing’ we can go back to the core, namely the fact that people are moved by the mystery of God. And it is precisely this being moved that lays the foundation for community and ministry.

Religious do not have the exclusive right to be moved by the Mystery, to be moved by God. History has taught us that there have been many broad lay movements that have laid the foundation for new developments. The poverty movement, the *Devotio Moderna*, the mercy movement, emancipation movements, social movements, liberation movements etc. have all created new openings for far-reaching developments in the Church and in society.

In my preceding words I have said that, for many people, the Church as an institution is no longer a place to come home to. Still, people are touched and moved by and *because of* the Mystery. With their religious experience and the intimacy with God they experience, where do they find a home? Where do they find leadership and adequate guidance on their quest? I find this a serious matter. There are monasteries and communities that create a sense of home and assume this leadership and guidance role. I also consider it important that a growing number of people are enrolling in spiritual guidance courses. People realise that guidance of the religious experience and intimacy with God needs an open and mature approach.

### **Religious life and ‘re-sourcing’**

It is interesting to see that, in various religious institutes, re-sourcing (returning to the sources) has led to new initiatives in the areas of reflection, prayer, and social involvement. Several abbeys and monasteries have become centres where people find peace, silence and deepening. Many communities and monasteries offer small-scale, accessible reflection programmes. It is fascinating that sisters and brothers from various religious institutes – although faced with a proportional increase of their ageing population – are involved in the international network against traffic in women and children. It is fascinating that your General Council has joined the Franciscan NGO in the United Nations to fight for children’s rights. It is meaningful that your Province of West-Central Europe helps to shape the Moria project in Nijmegen (Netherlands), which offers rehabilitation to young people who have been in prison. It is refreshing that, in your house in Nijmegen, you have a project called ‘Open House for Young People – An Inner Journey’, whose spiritual counsellor, Clara van de Ven, meets with young adults in an accessible way and guides them as they make an inner journey.

The distinctly multicultural and multireligious districts in our big cities have given the initial impetus to organise the annual ‘multicoloured religious life’ event. The missionary experience of religious institutes is meaningful in these districts, where there is dialogue with other religions. In many religious institutes, re-sourcing and re-orientation have led to a renewed awareness of the value of their charism. In practice, this then leads to new vocations and, in some cases, to attention for their own charism within pastoral care.

It is also refreshing that re-sourcing (returning to the sources) has led to the development that many ‘lay people’ are inspired by the authentic and original passion for God and people as expressed in the Rules or other important documents of religious institutes. You have been familiar with this phenomenon since the very foundation of your institute, as both the Marist Fathers and Brothers have always embraced laity or associates. These associates are an integrated part of your tradition and your movement.

Religious 'lay people' can be distinguished into four main categories. This is not to say in any way that the movement and the development are restricted to these categories.

- Associated members of religious institutes and communities. In general, these are lay people who are more or less directly connected with these institutes or communities. Many of them have made a spiritual commitment and both parties have accepted certain rights and duties.
- Communities of religious institutes whose members are a mixture of religious and lay people. Here we see how passion for the charism has led to the development that 'lay people' share the life of the community and help to build it within the bounds of their living and working conditions.
- Movements, especially lay movements, that pass on the spiritual heritage of religious. Some of these movements may also be in charge of a project or an activity of a religious institute.
- Communities of mainly lay people who, although they maintain strong ties with the spirituality of a religious institute, constitute independent units nonetheless.

As Carmelites we created in the early 1980s the possibility of women joining our community. Ever since, our communities have become a mix of men and women. We have made room for this development in our communities, our commissions, our formation team, our General Administration and in the Chapter, our highest government authority. There is a growing number of people who build an association together. The Carmel Movement, a lay movement, has also happily welcomed more members. New groups of lay Carmelites are emerging, even in places where there are no regular communities. The bounds of the Christian Church are being stretched. Similar developments occur in other institutes as well, perhaps also in yours.

It befits religious to be modest, especially in processes concerning passion for God and for people. After all, religious do not have exclusive rights to this passion for God. This passion for God and people is multicoloured, and it exists both within and beyond the churches; as well as within and beyond the great religions. In our secularised, multicoloured and multireligious society it is important to make room for this intimacy with God, for this passion for God and people, so that people can find a home where their passion is approached and shared in a respectful manner. It is also important to create a foundation on which people, with their passion, can build a way to the future.

### **The Future of Religious Life: New Relationship Forms**

Religious life has a future indeed, if we may believe the pithy reflection of the French theologian Claude Geffré: 'In our time the heart of what religion is revealed, namely: intimacy with God'. Religious life has a future also because of the processes of re-sourcing and awareness that occur within religious institutes, and because of the growing number of

people who maintain a relationship with a religious institute and its sources of inspiration. What exact shape the future will take, however, is not yet clear.

At a platform meeting of the Conference of Dutch Religious experiences were exchanged in terms of associations and other alliances. It was interesting to see which common aspects emerged from this:

- The beginning of an association with the charism of a religious institute is connected with experiences of friendship, with the search for meaning and support in daily life, with a need for spirituality, with the experience that a rule may prove a good personal guideline for a spiritual journey, with the desire to live in a balance between action and contemplation, with the need to give God a human face, and with the passion for Jesus as a model for God's passion for people.
- Introduction, formation and guidance are recurring elements. In many cases, there is a well-defined programme that will help the person to grow into the movement, into the association.
- There is an explicit commitment, the intensity of which may differ greatly. In some cases, emphasis is on someone's personal journey and their own initiative. In others, emphasis is on a more structured commitment model which entails a process of initial formation and taking a vow.
- Making the commitment and taking a vow take place according to a ritual and in the context of a liturgical service.
- Several groups and movements want to be as independent as possible in every aspect. Others consciously lean on the religious institutes they are connected with.
- Several groups and movements have an explicit mission, which may be directed at missionary activities in Third World countries or at local projects and activities of the religious institute. One form of mission may also be to support the religious institute, the abbey, the local community.
- The connection with a religious institute often creates a framework for international connections, as most religious institutes are internationally oriented.
- Important also is the clarification of mutual rights and duties. Questions as to how to determine and supervise mutual rights and duties lead to new consultative forms and structures that involve each party concerned.
- There is an explicit awareness of development processes and a great degree of openness toward learning from the tradition, from other people's experiences, from past problems, pitfalls and failures.
- In any form of involvement or commitment it is fascinating to study which place relatives, the spouse, friends, family and children take. In some experiences this goes very smoothly, in others it may cause tension.

Reality shows that there are developments that move toward new forms of religious life and new commitments. These developments deserve to be given space, and they require forms of reflection in terms of community life, in terms of the vows, and in terms of the 'lay' spirituality in relation to that of a religious institute. In a recent critical reflection, Erik Borgman, a lay Dominican, offered significant guidelines, reference points and evaluation tips. On the 9<sup>th</sup> day of the platform meeting of the Vocations Commission of the Dutch Conference of Religious, he spoke about the self-supporting ability of 'lay' groups and organisations that connect and associate with religious institutes. He addressed the question of what is important when lay or associate movements want to be associated with the charism and projects of regular religious institutes. He offered the following reflections.

- A narrow vision of religious life has a negative effect on the ability to be self-supporting. Only if 'lay people' see their own way of shaping a tradition of religious life as fully legitimate, can they become 'self-supporting'. This does not only imply that they must distance themselves from distinctions confirmed by Canon Law, but also from deep-rooted visions of the identity of both religious in the canonical sense and 'lay people'. For example, a common belief held for a long time that 'lay people' who are connected with a religious institute were just part-time religious with a partial commitment. In this sense, it is also important to reflect on our own forms of profession: to take on the responsibility of shaping the religious tradition of which we are part. This will definitely distinguish between lay people, but that may also be necessary in order to make progress.
- When lay groups are considered 'heirs' of religious life, this usually implies that the members of the religious institutes determine the heritage. In this way, any difference may seem to be a shortcoming on the part of the 'lay people'. This is what 'religious' in the canonical sense of the word often do, and, as a result, 'lay people' can never come up to the mark in their eyes. But often enough it is also the 'lay people' themselves who continue to urge the religious to pass their riches on to them and who continue to consider themselves insufficiently formed. Thus, they maintain the teacher-student relationship with the religious. It seems more appropriate to see religious life as a life that must be re-designed over and over again. Religious in the classical sense of the word are more experienced re-designers, and their design has a longer and, in any case, a more respectable tradition. But the future is new to both groups, religious and laity, and it can be approached with shared instruments: knowledge, the living tradition, and new experiences.
- In order to be self-supporting, religious lay communities must cultivate their own access to the spiritual tradition with which they connect. It is important that there can be one-on-one exchanges about this spiritual tradition between the lay people, their sisters and brothers in the canonical sense, and others. This applies even more to the lay community as a whole. In any case, some must have the skills to create a

meaningful connection between the lives of lay people and central documents and fundamental notions from their spiritual tradition. This must be a significant part of the life of the lay community. It is also an important aspect of initial formation. New members must be taught the art of making a meaningful connection between their own lives and the core values captured in these central documents.

- To be self-supporting means that a group has its own organisation that is to be kept alive and vital, both in terms of government and finance.
- In addition to a spiritual heritage, religious institutes also have a material and cultural heritage. If no new ways are found in this respect with careful perseverance and creative zeal, then the viable future of a lay community will be at stake.

### **Vocation: current, challenging and surprisingly new**

God continues to call people to make His presence visible in our secularised, multicultural and multireligious society. God makes Himself known through the religious experiences people have. People enter into an intimate relationship with God. We are invited to reflect in a new way on vocation, on our path as a spiritual path, on religious life and on religious community. It is a challenge to courageously test our familiar frames of reference in the light of the experiences of modern-day people. It is a challenge to renew our understanding of vocation in the light of today's circumstances. If, as religious communities and people with a religious engagement, we want to have the right to exist, then it seems important that we present God as a lifelike and near presence in the Church and in society. We are invited to venture on new ways confidently and courageously, especially now that many familiar structures prove vulnerable and the future of religious life does not appear self-evident. New developments present themselves. We are challenged to make visible the possible meaning of religious life in this day and age. We are invited to make our core values distinct. We are challenged to study how we can experience the future and shape it in a Church and a society where people are searching for what truly adds meaning to their lives. We are challenged to offer people who are contemplating the mystery of God in their lives a foundation and a home which will help them as they go into the future.

The purpose of a crisis – although it is a difficult process – is to sort oneself out and to learn to see what is truly important and what has become dead weight. I think that the crisis of the past decades – however difficult it has been – has also offered new ways whose quality is more important than their quantity. I see people make radical choices. Generally speaking, people who enter a religious community are not in their twenties. They have been tried and tested in life. For them God is a treasured reality in life. Based on their connection with God and their passion for the Mystery, they make radical, far-reaching choices.

If I contemplate what is happening here and there, I find it encouraging for the future of religious life. There are many indications that there is renewed space and attention for the Mystery with which we must learn to have a relationship in a secularised world, a world where people think they are autonomous. People who are moved by the Mystery give us a sense of direction, different though it may be from the design we have always known and lived. In essence, this is not new. After all, vocation is an intervention in one's existence. People have always been capable of going ways, in addition to existing structures, that have affected the developments in religious life. I feel that today's developments too will lead us to a period when there will be a form of religious life in the Netherlands, in Europe and perhaps beyond the European borders, that will have the right to exist within the secularised world precisely because of its attention for the Mystery, precisely because of the space the Mystery gets in life, precisely because of the personal intimacy with God, precisely because of the practice of equality of people regardless of their background, their culture and their colour, precisely because of the practice of sisterhood and brotherhood between people.

I wish you a productive meeting and thank you for your attention.

Tjeu Timmermans O.Carm.

Chairman of the Conference of Dutch Religious