

***The Historiography of Religious Congregations in Europe:
Orientations and Proposals***

(A summary of a study by Giancarlo Rocca)

The religious congregation, which took form in the 19th century, became widespread first in France, in the Lower Countries, Italy, Germany and then in all of Europe. Later it also spread in America, Africa, Asia, and Australia, thanks to the emigration and missionary activities of numerous religious men and women and later, thanks too, to the foundations of local congregations.

FIRST PART: THE HISTORIOGRAPHY OF THE RELIGIOUS CONGREGATIONS IN EUROPE

1. Available Materials

From 1995 onwards, the studies made on the historiography of religious congregations in Europe can be classified in three major categories: methodological orientation historiography, national historiography and historiography by theme.

a) First questions with regards to method

Stanislao da Campagnola in 1977 already saw the risks of religious historiography of his time. First and foremost, there was an obsession in the search for the origins of religious institutes, as if the knowledge of which and the going back to the past is a guarantee of fidelity and permanence in time, all at the expense of the awareness of the factors that would allow for their continuity. Then the fact that it is the work of religious men and women, members of the institutes whose history is being written, (think that) they are the only ones who are capable of reconstructing it. Finally, he noted that there was a tendency to **explain the history of religious life, especially when it comes to reforms, by searching for reasons in external factors like schisms, suppressions, sequestration of religious houses and goods**, etc., (therefore defending itself almost apologetically) without considering the environments in which the religious institutes were born and in which they forged their characteristics.

In 1985 *Sergio Zaninelli* emphasized the fact that the work to be accomplished should not be hagiographic but definitely historiographic, and the growing awareness that this can only be accomplished by putting the specific (that of the "catholic") within the general frame (that of the society), and vice versa. A new way of addressing the issue is definitely methodical, i.e., not to study the religious institutes as a separate entity, centered only in itself, because their physiognomy can only be reconstructed if it is seen within the general history of society.

In 1990 *Yvonne Turin* noted a change in the French historiography of the congregations of women. The dawning of sociology has modified their orientation. Therefore, there arose two modes of recounting their history: first, the hagiographic and apologetic mode which provoked critical and anticlerical literature. While in the second mode the author writes history no longer with the intent of preaching nor to edify his readers but to reconstruct an history that is closer to reality.

On the of historiographic question, the *Dizionario degli Istituti di Perfezione* (DIP), published in 1997, made a distinction between an history written by the religious, those belonging to religious institutes, and an history written by lay people, that is, those who do not belong to those institutes. The first classification was considered to give more attention to the religious aspects of history but which run the risk of simplifying the historiographical overview with an apologetic slant. The second classification, instead, was more conscious of the social, economic, environmental circumstances to

which the religious, generally, do not give so much attention. The DIP required that every expression of religious life be put in its proper context.

b) The national historiography

In the 1980's sociology and the so-called studies *di genere* brought about a new religious feminist history in Ireland because of American influence.

In 1996, Joos van Vug saw the Dutch historiography in three major stages: 1) commemorative volumes of individual institutes and their founders; 2) that with social character; 3) studies written by professional historians. From a purely descriptive vision of the past, it focuses on long-term phenomena.

In the year 2000 Paul Wynants wrote about the Dutch and Belgian historiography of religious active life in the 19th and 20th centuries. He accepted a division in three stages: 1) hagiography; 2) that of religious sociology; 3) that of religious life in its concrete reality.

Wynants distinguished the evolution of the problems, the state of awareness and the *desired* for the future. From the thrusts coming from sociology, it has passed on to the examination of some themes like vocation, the insertion of the religious in social life, the structures of common life. Regarding the feminist publications, Wynants found that its reconstruction was dictated by the idea of valuing the person(s) and her work but in a manner that seemingly does not correspond to historical data. It is almost as if the whole of the person's life evolved only in the "acceptance-resistance" framework (therefore, in a continuous tension or conflict, among others, with the cleric). He also noted a great equilibrium in Annelies van Heijst, who found unity in the life of the religious through the so-called "the paradigm of the passion", which demonstrates how the religious has foreseen a place for asceticism and mortification in their spiritual life, and therefore, are elements that are not only supported or accepted but also desired by them.

In addition, Wynants, offered his own interpretation of the history of religious life in the 19th and 20th centuries. The "catholic awakening" has multiplied the catholic presence in society. With the massive intervention of the State and with the improvement of living conditions, numerous women also entered the social scene. If one adds to this the demands of the Canon Law which the Church imposes on the religious women separating them more and more from the social life, it is easy to understand their difficulties and crisis.

As for the studies that still yet to be done, Wynants pointed out some general characteristics: the role played by the religious nun or of those religious dedicated to the care of the sick; the affective relationship between the religious and their "teachers" or between the religious women themselves; the kind of social life there is in the community; the study of their magazines and bulletins; for the period preceding the First World War, the monographs on the charitable and hospital apostolate, as well as specific studies to illustrate the contribution of the religious women to *Welfare State* after World War II, to the evolution of their spirituality and, in general, to all the questions coming from the Second Vatican Council (updating, leaving the religious institutes, closure of religious houses, conservation or conversion of works, etc.).

As can be seen, Wynants moved towards examining everything (about religious life): formation, daily life, the mentality (of the religious)--- thereby leading to consider as "whole" the infinite variety of the spectrum of investigation, but without discussing if this "entirety" or this endless examination of individual parts could really reflect the essence or nature of a religious congregation.

The Italian historiography during those years insisted instead on the **question of methodology**. After he underlined the hagiographical character of many publications and the lack of attention of the

general hagiography (= lay) with respect to the social phenomenon of the religious congregations, Fulvio De Giorgi in the year 2000, **reaffirmed that it was necessary to modify the history of religious institutes starting from the history of society and no longer from the internal history of the founders or of the institute itself.** In 2002 in Italy, he distinguished two major models of historiography, situated before and after the Vatican Council II: the first (model) is **deductive**, departing from the point of view of the founder and of the institute; the second (model), instead, is **inductive**, which sees in the general history and in the history of the Church those points which allowed both the founder and the institute to be inserted in the historical process in a more realistic way, linking both to the reality which they saw or made up.

The convention which took place in Rome in 2001 and participated in by historians from Belgium, France, Germany, England, Ireland, Italy, Holland and Switzerland, remains to be of fundamental importance for the historiography of the religious institutes in Europe in the 19th and 20th centuries. The historiographical line is summarized into three main stages:

- 1) classified as apologetic or hagiographic those which endured towards the 1960s;
- 2) from the 1950s to 1970s the work of scholars with university formation dealt particularly on **sociology** (studies on quantities, demographic analysis, recruitment, the link between the apostolic works with that of social reality, etc.) and, particularly innovative, is the prevalence of studies on female religious congregations instead of that of male and missionary congregations; and
- 3) the third stage are those studies after the 70s which were inspired by “a return to the sources” as requested by the Vatican II to all religious institutes.

The three stages do not have the same chronological development in the different countries and the best historiography were written by lay historians.

In France, after the great work of Calude Langlois in 1984, the female religious congregations were now seen as a whole, while a study as such has not yet been done for the male institutes.

This marked national character is also present in German historiography. In fact J. Schmiedl did not have any difficulty in pointing out the difficulties suffered by the religious institutes both from *Kulturkampf* nor from Nazism, as well as pointing out the enterprising character assumed by many institutes throughout the 18th and 19th centuries with the consequence of having the problem of reconciling this managerial aspect to that of their religious identity.

Even Susan O’Brien agreed on the lesser critical character of English historiography more so on the belated study on female religious congregations. In Ireland, instead, the same Susan O’Brien observed that there is more emphasis on the very strong **emigration** of its religious to America, England and Australia. She arrived at the conclusion that even if it treats of two nearby countries, England and Ireland, in fact, they have two different historiographies: England is more interested in highlighting Anglicanism, of conversions to Catholicism and of religious coming from different parts of Europe exiled in England. Instead, Irish historiography talks more of female religious institutes which are strongly dependent on ecclesiastical hierarchy.

Up to this point in time, as can be seen, no one of these scholars ever worked on the “periodization” of the history of religious congregations. A first attempt was made by Nicola Raponi, for Italy. He identified three major stages in the history of the Italian congregations:

- 1) from around 1800 to 1848, characterized by the formation of religious congregation and the many foundations in Northern Italy;

- 2) from 1948 towards the end of the century, characterized by the suppression of religious institutes and the necessity of responding to the new problems of the Italian society; and
- 3) from 1900 to 1950 saw major variation and new foundations in Southern Italy.

This sluggishness in considering the role played by religious congregations in the national history can be observed also in Dutch historiography, almost as if they are seen to be a separated and isolated world. Future studies should not deal anymore on single institutes, but preferably a study by theme.

The lack of studies of social character and of *di genere* seem to be conspicuous in Switzerland. Proposals for future research emerged in the Convention of 2001: the role played by the Holy See (through the Roman Curia and the nunciature) and the diocesan structures for the development of the congregations; to trace a profile of the religious in his/her spiritual characteristics; to examine the tension between the contemplative life and the demands of the apostolate; the role played by the religious belonging to the institutes which were suppressed during the French Revolution (Jesuits, Franciscans, etc.) in the birth of new institutes; the usefulness of having the statistics of the number of religious men and women, their number according to gender, their nationality and their spiritual orientation; a research on the economy of the congregations; to have comparative studies in order to understand how liberal governments were able to sustain the foundations in the colonies as the outposts of nations.

The proposed themes appear to be endless but they indicate the most basic question: can we go towards an infinite fragmentation with the consequence of an impossibility of putting all in a unified whole or will the "totality" of these religious congregations can be really attained thanks to these studies however fragmented?

In 2006 Gisela Fleckenstein underlined the importance of photos as an additional source for the historiography of religious institutes.

As for the issue of methodology Grazia Loparco in 2008 showed how the theme 'religious' had remained a bit "shadowy" even in Italian historiography and explained how the historical-critical method with which the history of any religious institution should be written. Giancarlo Rocca then made a distinction on the triple course made by the Italian historiography: studies made on individual congregation with an apologetic slant until 1960; the return to the origins (of the congregations) was balanced by the publication of other sources (materials written by the founders, the first constitutions, etc.). Successively, a study was launched no longer of single institute, but of institutes taken together in a specific framework (a diocese or a particular event in the life of that country). Finally, it was intended to focus at the center of the research no longer the founder or the institute itself but a university discipline (the history of the school, that of the professional school, schools for the deaf and mute, that of pedagogy, of the economy, etc.), within which the founder and the institute stand as witnesses of a determined aspect of the social and national life.

This mode of putting historiography into a certain period of time on the question of methodology does not seem to have been followed-up in latter publications.

c) ***Thematical Historiographies***

A progress in the historiography of the congregations can come from examining its thematic aspect. It is possible to present here only three, each one is complete on its own.

- *The missionary question*. This has not been treated widely. It is worthy to note the new magazine *Histoire & Missions chrétiennes*.
- *Secularization*
- *The activity of the religious teacher*

2. Towards a synthesis of the historiography of the religious congregations

a) *The evolution of the methodologies*

In the study of the religious congregations there are four fundamental stages: from the hagiographical model to the study of the individual institute, but situated in its context; then the study of the different institutes considered in its entirety; and finally to the history of a discipline.

- *The hagiography*. This sees the founders from the point of view of the history of salvation and its preoccupation is to show how this founder has searched to obey the Will of God. It can be understood, therefore, how this type of historiography generates an antireligious literature which qualifies as inventions or the psychological exaltations of the enthusiasm of the writer.

- *The Institute*. It is certainly more difficult to show the fulfillment of the will of God in the history of a religious institute, although this is always the idea, because its members are not all saints. From among many examples, we'll present here three of such study, which seem to have a significant trending.

Pietro Stella – in 1968 has already focused on the socio-cultural and political aspects of Turin during Don Bosco's time – which permits one to see the issues in another light, i.e., human, but with the advantage of showing the lucidity of the founders in the discernment of the problems of their time and in their search to solve them.

A similar review was done by Paul Wynants for the whole institution of the Sisters of Providence of Champion.

The third study is about the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians who, in the 150th anniversary of the Unity of Italy, wanted to review the almost 140 years of their history. The authors, Grazia Loparco and Maria Teresa Spiga, made use of statistical data to illustrate the presence of 13,853 Italian religious nuns and of the 1,162 houses founded in Italy, distributing their data per year and per decade as well as per region. They took note of the life of service the houses, they have cross-referenced the number of houses with that of the number of profession to see the relation between these two, and they have indicated the number of recipients who benefitted from their work.

The result of these studies – of Stella, Wynants and Loparco/Spiga – is undeniably a wealth of data, in fact through these studies it is possible to collect many elements typical of the society they studied: Turin at the time of Don Bosco for Stella, the scholastic and liberal Belgium and the World War I for Wynants, the women and children of Italy until 2010 for Loparco/Spiga in the different regions, with the problems and the solutions the sisters found to solve these.

-- *The studies taking the institutes as a whole*. These are necessary to consider the religious congregations within a general frame which takes into account a common historical platform from which it was born.

-- *The discipline*. At the center of the research, in this case, is no longer the founder or the institute even if taken together with other institutes or in its relation with the social environment, but the "discipline" of historiography, understood as a field of study or teaching in universities.

b) *Criteria for the study of religious congregations*

The criteria can be summarized as such: a detailed chronological analysis of the history of congregations, the use of a vast bibliography that allows one to situate the events (political, religious, social, etc.) of the congregations in their time, collection of sources (written and oral), a study of the particular aspects of the life of the institute (material, spiritual, interior and exterior life, daily life, etc.), without concealing failures. To provide space for new issues, among others the promotion of women, the professionalism in the activities, making use of iconography, tables, graphics and geographical maps, if they serve to make history more clear. The primary responsibility for the historian of the religious congregation is to show what really happened without forgetting, however, the ideals with which the founder and the institute had in mind.

c) *Thematical historiography.*

It is a must to deepen this mode of doing historiography even if it does not resolve the problem of how one can arrive at a complete study of the congregation.

d) *A global history of the religious congregations?*

The synthesis must not be done through an enumeration or a description of the many aspects in which the Institute expresses itself but through an analysis of its structure. They were born to respond to a determined need of society, through their apostolate the religious congregations were able to modify, correct and better these needs --- this to their merit --- with the consequence that the same could also be the cause of their decline.

II. PROPOSALS FOR A STUDY OF EUROPEAN RELIGIOUS CONGREGATIONS

1. The “religious congregation”: an unknown institution?

- a) *The first theme is about the temporary nature of the vows.*
- b) *The second theme relates to the vow of poverty*
- c) *The third theme is the secret or the hidden character of not a few congregations*
- d) *A fourth theme which has not yet enjoyed an overall treatment concerns the dependence of the female religious congregation on the superior general of the male religious congregation—this was common during the 19th century. (A study of which was already done by the FMA-SDB)*

2. New themes

Presenting the historiography of the religious congregations some themes have also been indicated which this Author hopes, sooner or later, would be studied more profoundly. Here we shall point out two (themes): first, is on the European congregations, and the second is on the femininity of the female religious congregations.

a) *The European congregations*

Up until this day there has not been any comprehensive statistical study on the religious congregations founded in Europe between 1801 or 1814 (if one wants to begin from the time of the Restoration) and 2010. As a result of this work, one could have the advantage of being able to point out when they were founded and attempt, therefore, a periodization, one for Europe, and the other for each individual nation, finding out when they reached their peak and when their decline started. Meanwhile, the congregation’s taking root in other continents was slow, a sign that the social conditions there were not the same as that in Europe.

b) *The femininity of the female religious congregations*

The vast majority of the religious congregations of the nineteenth / twentieth century are feminine, but to delineate its history still does not mean to outline an history *di genere* (of its own), because there is a need to specify what makes an history feminine. It seems, instead, that the feminine characteristics of a congregation would be better highlighted if it underlines what the nuns can do as women and as religious (in schools, in hospitals, etc.) and how this evolution came about; those areas which for a time were reserved only for clerics (teaching catechism, the role of the religious sister during recollection and spiritual retreats of the girls, preaching, etc. etc.), were gradually passed on also to the nuns. In this way it would also be easier to note their role with regards to the emancipation of women.

Conclusion