

Diarmuid O'Murchu. *Religious Life in the 21st Century: The Prospect of Refounding*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2016. 251 pp. \$26.00 ISBN: 9781626982079.

Reviewed by Paul Thomas Michalenko, ST  
Catholic Theological Union

This is O'Murchu's twenty-fifth book since 1981. His writing career began with a book on religious life and here he returns to the topic once again but thirty-five years later. He borrows on a theme from Gerald Arbuckle, "refounding," which first appeared on the scene in 1988. However, O'Murchu offers a historical context and a challenge to adjust our paradigm about religious life. In the historical context, he reminds us of the work of Lawrence Coda, whose research identified a "cyclic pattern of recurring timespans, approximately three hundred years each, during which a dominant model (of religious life) evolves, expands, stabilizes and declines" (64). In all, six cycles are identified beginning with 300 CE. He suggests that in the twenty-first century we will experience (and are experiencing) the decline of one of these cycles. There are all sorts of excuses we can give for this phenomenon, but in the long run it is a "theological process, with the Holy Spirit animating and supporting its unfolding, including the decline" (67).

O'Murchu describes these cycles from apotactic movements to monastic to mendicants to apostolic expressions. He gives special credit to women's founders and their religious movements given the difficult oppression of a male patriarchal church. In fact, he argues that the ongoing attempt at ecclesiastical control of religious life has contributed to its decline.

For the author, the way into the future is to retrieve the liminal (prophetic) role of religious. For him this means reclaiming the unique role of being set apart culturally and spiritually not just for themselves but to serve the wider community living out more deeply human values. This involves embracing the world on the margins for a new epoch. This refounding would include building bridges across false and violent divisions in our society, establishing multicultural and trans-religious relationships, co-creating a new heaven and a new earth, affirming our identity with and for the laity, and placing ourselves in marginal positions with the poor and defenseless, among others. This will require different skills, awareness, and experience than where religious have focused their attention and ministry. Educational and medical institutions that were created for a different time no longer need our same attention.

Another understanding of the future of religious life is a spiritual shift from a privileged understanding of salvation by escaping this world to a spirituality of engagement. Religious do not take vows to follow rules for their individualized salvation but rather embrace the vows by reclaiming key values in our world. The author renames the vows to make his point. Celibacy is the "vow for relatedness" (146), poverty that for "mutual sustainability" (159), and obedience that for "mutual collaboration" (159). His chapter on celibacy has some provocative notions. "Celibate calling is a highly sexualized one...the celibate may well be the most erotic of all humans" (155). He suggests that most religious are "androgynous" at heart, able to move into roles that the culture has not assigned them. Also,

since these days our understanding of sexual intimacy transcends biological reproduction, what are the implications for celibate intimacy?

To engage in the difficult refounding process, O'Murchu again returns to Cada, though he reorganizes the priorities as (1) a profound renewal in the life of prayer, faith, and centeredness in Christ, (2) a reappropriation of the founding charism, and (3) a transforming response to the signs of the times. This requires a contemplative waiting that sensitizes us to what the pregnant Spirit wants to bring to birth, only after intentionally grieving what needs to die. O'Murchu writes,

“Sometime in the latter half of the twenty-first century, probably toward its end, we can expect a new breakthrough for the vowed life. We can do nothing to bring it about at an earlier date; it is a divine initiative and not of our making” (229).

O'Murchu does not offer any new great insights for the dilemma we all feel with religious life these days. However, he does give hope to the possibility that the Spirit will “refound” religious life in her own time. We but need to be faithful. We also need to let go of religious life as we have known it.