# LIMINAL METAPHORS AND THE SECULARIZATION

## OF ROMAN CATHOLIC SISTERS

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Cet article aborde un aspect du processus d'interpréta-
tion de la vie religieuse ou cloîtrée amorcé au sein
des communautés religieuses catholiques romaines dans
les années '70. On avance que, durant cette période de
transition, on a fait l'expérience d'un rejet massif du
concept de "cloître" en tant que clôture au sens
physique, en soulignant le fait qu'il y avait là plus
qu'une simple modification de la pratique communau-
taire, axé sur une réalité transcendante de caractère
utopique qu'on aurait voulu orientée en direction d'une
expérience communautaire de caractère profane. En fait,
ce type de rejet apparaît comme une transformation du
concept de "cloître," ne niant point le fait de la
continuité au niveau de l'identité communautaire. Les
religieuses catholiques romaines ont eu recours à deux
images de pointe: la fiancée éternelle du Christ et le
clown, ou bouffon, du monde profane.

This paper examines one aspect of the interpretive
process undertaken by religious communities of North
American Roman Catholic sisters in the 1970s, or the
redefinition of cloister. It is suggested that during
this transitional period, widespread rejection of the
concept of cloister *as physical enclosure* was more than
a mere illustrative shift away from a communal paradigm
stressing utopian transcendence, and toward a communal
paradigm identified as profane. In fact, this rejection
signaled a transformation in the concept of cloister
that allowed for continuity in communal themes of
identity across contrasting paradigms. To effect this
transformation, Roman Catholic sisters contrasted two
liminal images: the transcendent Bride of Christ, and
the profane clown.

## INTRODUCTION

Communities of Roman Catholic religious women may include
nuns or sisters. Nuns are religious women who profess solemn vows
of poverty, chastity, and obedience, and who are members of reli-
gious orders. Sisters are religious women who profess simple vows
and are members of congregations. Traditionally, nuns observed
strict enclosure, while sisters observed a modified enclosure
that allowed for restricted contact with secular people outside

of the cloister. In the 1960s, communities of Roman Catholic sisters in North America began a process that redefined their purpose and identity. During that period, the Council of Vatican II in Rome imposed two guidelines to achieve this transformation of purpose and identity. First, religious communities were given a twenty-year experimental period that held in abeyance all prior rules and customs regarding monastic lifestyle practices. In addition, they were cautioned to reexamine the intent and purpose of their founders in terms of present-day societal needs. Eventually, decisions based on these guidelines effected a shift in emphasis. The majority of religious communities rejected a communal paradigm based on medieval monasticism. They created new communal identities that permitted an identification with, and absorption of, secularism.

Research data for this paper were gathered by the author as a participant/observer from 1972 to 1976. In this paper, one aspect of the interpretive process undertaken by communities of Roman Catholic sisters in the 1970s—a redefinition of the concept of cloister—will be examined. The term *cloister* refers to a place of religious seclusion for either men or women, and connotes retirement from the world. With regard to women, the term *convent* is often used as a synonym for cloister. This paper suggests that widespread rejection of the concept of cloister as a physical enclosure during the transitional period of the 1960s was more than a mere illustrative shift away from a communal paradigm stressing utopian transcendence, and toward a communal paradigm identified as profane. Instead, this rejection signaled a transformation in the concept of cloister that allowed for continuity in communal themes of identity across contrasting paradigms.

Prior to the 1950s, the concept of cloister dominated the monastic perspective organizing communities of Roman Catholic sisters in North America. This concept was characterized by spatial enclosure within a convent, which effectively excluded outsiders from frequent interaction with sisters. The cloister was viewed as ensuring "separation from the world." In addition, it imposed a form of spirituality on members that internalized personal dependence on God alone.

This paper argues that while deconstructing the concept of cloister as a physical enclosure within a monastic context, communities of Roman Catholic sisters in North America reconstructed the concept of cloister as a symbolic enclosure within a secular context. Two liminal images were used to effect this transformation: the transcendent Bride of Christ, and the profane clown. Maintaining the theme of cloister as intrinsic to communal identity, the paradox of being "in the world, yet separate from the world" continued to be stressed as a strategy for interaction and service in the wider social context.

## COMMUNITIES OF ROMAN CATHOLIC SISTERS PRIOR TO 1960: AN HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

The history of communities of Roman Catholic religious women in Western culture shows a gradual elaboration of the concept of cloister (Cita-Malard 1964). Very early in this history, the functions of religious women were explicitly mentioned in the New Testament (1 Timothy 5:3-17). By the fourth century, celibate religious women were given a public ceremony of consecration and were placed under the official direction of a Bishop (Reuther 1979). Towards the end of the fourth century, convents of women began to spread from the east to the west. In the sixth century, St. Benedict of Nursia introduced the concept of a religious life centered on the abbot/abbess and carried out within a monastery enclosure. The monastery was now forming a society independent of the outside world, and was both physically and spiritually self-contained.

The medieval Roman Catholic church saw the spread of mendicant orders over great distances. Members of mendicant orders beg for alms. The two largest mendicant orders established in medieval times time were the Dominicans and the Franciscans. In 1283, Pope Boniface VII established the cloister, with its walls and moats, as a protection against barbaric invasions of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. The concept of cloister then flourished and assumed symbolic and religious meaning. As a result, members of all Roman Catholic orders (male and female) took solemn vows and lived in cloisters.

The early eighteenth century marked a critical turning point in the definition of cloister. During that time, communities were formed of religious women who defined themselves as primarily apostolic (Liebowitz 1979). Whereas contemplative orders of religious women functioned under solemn vows and observed strict enclosure, apostolic congregations of religious women functioned under simple vows and provided services outside of the convent. In *Quarnvis Justo* in 1749, Pope Benedict XIV showed tolerance, but not formal approval, of groups of religious women who were engaged in charitable work outside of their cloisters. At that time, many of the rules regulating the contact of cloistered women with outsiders were imposed upon apostolic congregations and incorporated into their constitutions.

The proliferation of communities of Roman Catholic sisters in North America occurred largely as a response to the tides of European immigration. In the period between 1870 and 1900, large numbers of immigrants from Ireland, Germany, and other countries led to tremendous growth in the Roman Catholic population of the United States (Herberg 1955). As a result, fifty-nine new congregations of religious women were begun during this period (Code 1937). At the same time, bishops expressed the need for Catholic schools, hospitals, and orphanages. This apostolic, rather than

contemplative, orientation created confusion over the type of vows that were appropriate for communities of sisters in the United States. Confusion over whether the vows of sisters should be simple or solemn, and hence the types of enclosures that bound them, extended into all areas of their lives (Ewens 1978:108). For example, in pre-Civil War America, the contemplative custom of rising at midnight for extended prayer, combined with arduous daily work schedules in classrooms and hospitals, often resulted in poor health for members of apostolic communities.

In the 1800s, the difficulty of living under the strict ob-servance of cloister caused many religious communities in North America to seek modification of their European-based constitu-tions. Some sought autonomy by separating from their European foundations. The North American frontier required religious women to move out of their traditional environments and perform innova-tive works of charity. Thus, the rules of cloister were particu-larly detrimental to the interests of the Catholic church in North America at that time. Although the strict cloistering of contemplatives was viewed as impractical, a more moderate form of cloister continued to dominate the communal lifestyle of North American sisters until the late 1950s (Ewens 1979). As a conse-quence, the physical enclosure of communities of sisters was symbolically internalized by the individual. Thus, in nineteenth-century North America, privatization of the idea of cloister was reflected in the monastic metaphor of the Bride of Christ.

## CONTEMPORARY COMMUNITIES OF ROMAN CATHOLIC SISTERS
## IN NORTH AMERICA

Prior to the 1960s, communities of Roman Catholic sisters in North America were utopian in nature. In her analysis of the Oneida Community, Carden stressed the primacy of values in the definition of a utopian community as an organization "founded specifically to implement in its social structure a particular set of ideals" (1968:xvi). In utopian groups, boundary mainten-ance is coupled with a strongly-focused ideological system. Kanter (1972) suggests that boundary maintenance is the critical requisite for such groups if they are to maintain their self-definition over time.

As privatized by individuals and structurally enforced by the monastic ideal, the concept of cloister provided strong boundary maintenance for all Roman Catholic religious communi-ties. The Christian metaphor of death and resurrection became a central focus for the elaboration of a cloistered communal identity. Ebaugh (1977:15-18) describes the process of death to oneself and rebirth to God as summarizing the meaning behind modes of behavior that have characterized fifteen centuries of religious communities. This process sought a total reorientation and reorganization of each member's deepest attitudes. The result

was a radical restructuring of basic thought patterns, self-per-
ceptions, and attitudes:

> If we wish nothing to interpose between us and God,
> nothing to hinder our union with Him, if we wish divine
> blessings to flow in upon our souls, we must not only
> renounce sin and imperfection, but moreover strip
> ourselves of our personality, in so far as it
> constitutes an obstacle to perfect union with God.
> (Marmion 1925:61)

In Roman Catholic religious communities, the process of
death to self and rebirth to God sought to empty the soul of
selfishness so that it could be reborn to a life of union with
God. To be open to the supernatural movements of the Spirit, it
was necessary to control and regulate human feelings and desires.
For Roman Catholic sisters, the concept of cloister was an impor-
tant factor in attaining this emptying of the self. In its exter-
nal manifestations, the cloister effectively separated individual
sisters from contact with the world. For example, lay persons
were usually excluded from all convent areas except for a desig-
nated visitors' parlor. Visitors who were not relatives usually
interacted only with the porter or the Superior. Relatives visit-
ed only at brief, designated periods. Sisters never ate with rel-
atives, and many congregations customarily had two sisters in
attendance in a visitors' parlor. An informant in her seventies
recalled the effectiveness of rules of cloister as a way of
maintaining separation from the world:

> In the 1950s, we were still monastic and had strict
> rules of cloister. Each day was very predictable. You
> knew what you were to do. You would rise at 5:00 am and
> meditate for an hour. After breakfast the teachers
> would go off to school. You were still under a rule of
> silence then and so you didn't speak. You went right to
> the classroom and began to work. We didn't eat lunch
> with the secular teachers in the staff room. Instead,
> we ate lunch with the other sisters. I was the only
> sister in that school, and so, I ate lunch alone in my
> classroom. Right after school, we left to go home. You
> didn't see much of the other teachers in those days.
> Most of your time was spent with the children or work-
> ing in the classroom by yourself.

The privatization of the concept of cloister for Roman
Catholic sisters presumed a radical psychological dependence on
God alone. An informant in her eighties expresses this monastic
ideal:

> I came to religious life in 1915 because I received a
> call from God to live my life entirely for Him. I gave
> up everything that I had in order to grow closer to

God. The  other women who came were the same. They came
for the  same reason.  Everything you  did in religious
life was  done to bring you closer to God. The monastic
life and the Holy Rule helped you to do that.

The individual sister was to die  to the  self and  live for
God alone.  This internalization  of the concept of cloister com-
plemented its external manifestations.  Rules  of  silence illus-
trated  this  relationship,  and  aided  recollection.  To become
increasingly open to the  movements of  the Spirit  of God within
her, a  sister strove  to be  recollected at  all times. The body
attempted to mirror the state of the soul.  Sisters walked quiet-
ly, with  downcast eyes. Some areas in the convent enclosure were
designated as more conducive  to  recollection  than  others. For
example, strict  silence was  usually enforced in the chapel, re-
fectory, and bedrooms.  If  speaking  was  necessary  in bedroom
areas, individuals  stood at  the threshold  and spoke in subdued
tones. The refectory area remained silent until the Superior gave
permission to speak.

The structural  enclosure of  the cloister provided a mirror
for communal reflexivity. This reflexivity drew  attention to the
core components of communal identity (see Babcock 1980). In other
words, the cloister provided the necessity  for personal intimacy
with Christ. Thus, with its connotation of covenant intimacy, the
metaphor of the Bride of Christ became one of the  dominant self-
images of  sisters. They  sought to be of one mind and heart with
Christ  through  a  process  of  self-development  that  imitated
Christ's death  and resurrection  (Williams 1975:109, 123; Warner
1959:371-373; and von Hildebrand 1962:128). In  both the  Old and
New Testaments of the  Christian Bible,  the marriage  bond is a
common motif representing a covenant relationship between God and
His  people.  In  the  Old  Testament, Sion is referred to as the
Bride of Yahweh or God (Isaiah 62:4f), and adorns herself in bri-
dal apparel  (Isaiah 49:18).  This image  of Sion as the Bride of
the Lord has been common since the Book of Osee in the Old Testa-
ment, which  states that  the prophets represent the Covenant be-
tween Yahweh and Israel as a  marriage bond  (Osee 2:16; Jeremias
2:2; Ezechiel  16:8). In later Judaism, the Canticle of Canticles
was also interpreted in this sense. This imagery continues in the
New Testament,  with Christ  representing both the bridegroom and
the new Israel, while the church is the Bride (John 3:29).

The metaphor of the Bride of Christ is liminal in its conno-
tation of  transcendence, and  has served  as a key symbol in the
creation of  a contemporary  identity for  Roman Catholic sisters
(see Turner 1967; Harris 1977). This metaphor was emphasized in a
rite of passage that occurred when  young women  were accepted as
novices into  congregations. The  ceremony was preceded by a ten-
day retreat. With family and friends gathered in  the chapel, the
group of  postulants entered,  dressed in  white bridal gowns and
veils. While a traditional  bridal  chant  was  sung,  they knelt

before the Bishop. The novices were then formally given the habit
of the congregation, after which they retired to  the sacristy of
the church  to exchange  their bridal  attire for  the habit of a
sister. Following this, the  Bishop formally  gave each  sister a
religious name  symbolizing her  new identity.  Sisters often re-
ceived male names, to  indicate that  sexual differences  were no
longer emphasized. In this rite of passage, the goal of religious
life was explicitly stated. Franciscan Sisters traditionally wore
a crown  of thorns  at the  beginning of  the rite. The crown was
then replaced by the  habit and  religious veil  of the congrega-
tion, and a crown of white roses.

Within  the  monastic  paradigm,  each Roman Catholic sister
presented a liminal female form in her transcendence of the world
and its  values. Although work such as service to the poor placed
sisters *in* the world, they were  not to  be *of*  the world outside
their convents.  This paradox  was highlighted by the dialectical
tension of adhering to modified rules of cloister while simultan-
eously identifying the purpose of congregations as providing ser-
vices outside of the cloister. As Roman Catholic  sisters contin-
ued  to  experiment  with  nonmonastic lifestyle practices in the
1970s, rules of cloister were discarded.  In their  new constitu-
tions submitted to the Vatican in the early 1980s, communities of
sisters had rejected, either in part or in whole, the language of
transcendence with  its stress  on separation  from the world. In
its place, Roman Catholic sisters had  adopted language emphasiz-
ing the value of the immanently human and secular.

The secularization process initiated by the Council of Vati-
can II between 1962 and 1965 firmly rooted the identity  of Roman
Catholic sisters  in the  world. This  process also mandated that
sisters be profoundly of the world. In its decree on  the renewal
of religious life, the Council of Vatican II called for religious
communities to adjust  to both  the  changed  conditions  of the
times, and  the requirements  of the cultures in which they lived
and worked:

> Religious communities should be  properly instructed in
> the prevailing manners of contemporary social life, and
> its characteristic ways of thinking and feeling. .  . .
> Fresh forms  of religious  life .  . . should take into
> account  the  natural  endowments  and  manners  of the
> people,  and  also  local  customs  and  circumstances.
> (*Perfectae Caritatis*:479, cited in Abbott 1966:466-482)

Guidelines for implementation of  the decrees  of Vatican II
encouraged experimentation with diverse lifestyles, and permitted
the formally-approved constitutions of both orders  and congrega-
tions to  be replaced by interim bylaws. The ensuing experimenta-
tion had radical effects on the lifestyles of most North American
sisters.  Three  patterns  of  structural change emerged: (a) The
form of government shifted  from a  hierarchy to  a decentralized

body emphasizing collegiality; (b) As individual preferences
replaced uniformity in dress and behavior, individualism became
more pronounced; and (c) Removal of the physical enclosure of the
cloister resulted in ambivalent boundary maintenance between con-
vents of sisters and contemporary society. Throughout the 1970s,
ambivalence became a central concern. Communities of Roman Catho-
lic sisters continued to examine the essential components of a
redefinition of communal identity. An informant in her early
fifties recalled the difficulties this ambivalence raised:

> The most difficult aspect of change in the 1960s and
> 1970s was the degree of the breaking down of a sense of
> separation from the world. When we did away with the
> Holy Rule, many of our older women were confused. Some
> progressive communities moved too quickly into secular
> dress and secular jobs. And older women didn't have
> time to adjust. One of the main questions of the 1970s
> for religious communities was "How are we different
> from other Christian women who are not in religious
> life?" We had lived a monastic lifestyle as religious
> women for so long that we didn't know what our new
> identity as religious women in the world would look
> like.

Following Van Gennep, Turner (1967, 1969) clarified the
transformational process by locating the critical moment of
transformation that occurs during the liminal period: that point
"betwixt and between" one context of meaning and another. Charac-
teristic of this period is the appearance of marked ambiguity and
inconsistency in meaning, plus the emergence of liminal figures
who represent ambiguities and inconsistencies within themselves.
One of the liminal figures that emerged when religious communi-
ties in North America reconstructed their communal identity
around the value of the immanently human, rather than the explic-
itly transcendent, was the metaphor of the clown.

By appropriating the clown metaphor, North American sisters
continued to elaborate two themes central to the concept of
cloister: (a) Total dependency of the individual on God; and (b)
Apostolic activity as an expression of the paradox of being "in
the world, yet separate from the world." At the individual level,
certain attributes of the clown were reinterpreted as spiritual
virtues. Thus, the clown's simplicity and openness to the expres-
sion of the full range of humanity was viewed as analogous to the
simplicity and openness required for total dependence on God.
This attitude echoed the monastic theme of self-emptying reliance
on God, which was central to the identity of the sister in the
Bride of Christ metaphor. A young woman in her early twenties ex-
pressed the significance of clowning to acquiring this attitude
of dependency:

Last month, the novices from several communities got
together for a two-day workshop on clowning. It was the
first time that I did any clowning and I was surprised
at how it helps you to center in on prayer. There is a
freedom and openness—a vulnerability—that comes with
clowning. Once you have created your own face and cen-
tered in on prayer, it's amazing the degree of freedom
you acquire. I did things at the workshop that I never
thought that I would do. At the end of the weekend we
spent a few hours dressed up as clowns in a mall. There
are no barriers between people when you are clowning.

At the level of communal discourse, the clown provides a
framework for reflection on the central issue of identity for
religious communities. This central issue focuses on the nature
and scope of apostolic activity. In contrast to the restrictions
on interaction that are imposed by rules of physical cloister,
clowns are not excluded from any arena of human activity. This
attribute of the clown's performance has rich, liminal possibili-
ties for religious women as they reflect on the appropriate areas
for community ministry. An informant in her sixties notes:

My community was formed primarily to teach in separate
schools. But in the past twenty years the majority of
sisters have moved out of education completely. Our
ministries are more individualized now and we work in
whatever area we feel that we are called to. This
diversity has enriched our community but has also
created a lot of difficult questions. As a group of
religious women, we need to continually discern what
new areas of ministry are appropriate for apostolic
religious women. This is a difficult task that requires
much risk-taking on the part of individuals and the
group, because we have no prior models to fall back on.

This lack of enclosure enhances the role of the clown in
aiding reflection on the meaning of the human context. As a
collectively sustained symbolic structure, the performance of the
clown is an acted document or an acted text (Geertz 1973:3, 14;
Ricoeur 1973). As such, it is an imaginative work constructed out
of social materials (Geertz 1973:448-449). Clowning invites
audiences to explore the meaning of a clown's performance within
the context of the world that is interpreted by the performance.
Clowns often invite reflection on social reality by acting on the
margins or at the intersection of social order, and inverting or
negating that order.

This role is similar to that of a sister. Religious women
point to the transcendent and invite reflection on the meaning of
social reality through its relationship to a transcendent God. By
deconstructing the concept of cloister as physical enclosure,
communities of religious women created a range of possibilities

for the reconstruction of that concept as a symbolic enclosure within a profane context. Thus, the symbolic enclosure of contemporary sisters is often located by them at the intersections or inversions of social order. Nouwen discusses one possible image of the role of religious sisters within this profane context:

> Between the frightening acts of the heroes of this world, there is a constant need for clowns, people who by their empty, solitary lives of prayer and contemplation reveal to us our other side and thus offer consolation, comfort, hope and a smile. Rome is a good city to become aware of the need for clowns. This large, busy, entertaining, distracting city keeps tempting us to join the lion tamers and trapeze artists who get most of the attention. But whenever the clowns appear we are reminded that what really counts is something other than the spectacular and the sensational. It is what happens between the scenes. (1979:110)

Today, the metaphor of the clown causes sisters to confront the meaning of their adoption of the streets as their cloisters, while at the same time affirming their role between the scenes of world dramas.

Elaboration of the two themes associated with cloister assures continuity of two distinct, but related kinds of identity: (a) Individual identity as a sense of individual biographical continuity; and (b) Group identity as a sense of collective historical continuity (Myerhoff 1977). As religious women experienced communal renewal in the 1970s, they created new, secular metaphors which served as guidelines for the definition of the concept of community and, by implication, of themselves. The liminal ambiguity of the clown metaphor provides attributes to interpret continuity in identity across contrasting paradigms.

The metaphor of the Bride of Christ and of the clown overlap with a dominant spiritual image in Western Christian thought. This image is that of the *anawim* as representing the "poor in Spirit." In the Old Testament, the *anawim*, or poor of Yahweh (God), were represented initially as the weak or poverty-stricken (Leviticus 19:18). These *anawim* found themselves in humble circumstances and practiced resignation. Later, the term *anawim* referred to those who put their complete confidence in God. As the holy core of the nation, the *anawim* were totally submissive to God and disposed to do his will. Disinherited by this world, they relied on God alone rather than themselves or other people. It was to the "poor in Spirit" that God sent the Messiah (Isaiah 16:1-2; Luke 4:18-19). By contrast, the most radical image of the concept of the "poor in Spirit" in the New Testament was the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Throughout many centuries of Roman Catholic thought, the theme of the "poor in Spirit" has been reiterated through the imagery of the hermit, monk, and pilgrim. Recently, these attributes have been associated specifically with clowning. In the acclaimed Broadway musical, *Godspell*, the text of the Gospel of Matthew from the New Testament is used as a script for the enactment in parable of the death and resurrection of Jesus. Throughout the play, Jesus and his followers appear as clowns.

When Nouwen spoke to religious men and women in Rome in the late 1970s, the use of the clown metaphor was already widespread among religious communities in North America. Clowning, as an activity, is performed primarily by more liberal religious communities of women, which have progressively moved away from an explicitly monastic lifestyle. Within the context of these communities, clowning is usually restricted to a formal or informal ritual setting involving interaction of the clown(s) with a cross-section of the community. Two examples illustrate the nature of clowning in these settings.

An informant in her twenties describes one use of clowning in a liturgical setting:

> It was my turn to lead night prayers and everyone was assembled in Chapel. When it was time for the scripture reading to begin, I appeared as a white-face clown and acted out the parable of the Good Samaritan. I didn't know how the very senior sisters would react. But they were very welcoming of the clown. I thought the clown image was a good symbol of the Samaritan as well as a good image for our response in ministry.

An informant in her forties illustrates one community's use of clowns in an informal ritual setting:

> At the local and regional level, we had spent over five years as a community studying and rewriting our Constitution in order to send it in to Rome. Then the entire community assembled for a week in the summer and the Constitutional Committee presented the Constitution for our final approval or revision. When the Constitution was approved by the Assembly, we had a formal acceptance by the Community in a prayer service. The Constitutional Committee appeared in front of the Assembly dressed as clowns. The clowns distributed copies of the Constitution to each individual and then we celebrated.

In his speech, Nouwen called attention to four clown-like elements in spiritual life: solitude, celibacy, prayer, and contemplation. He noted:

> And slowly, I started to realize that in the great
> circus of Rome, full of lion tamers and trapeze artists
> whose dazzling feats claim our attention, the real and
> true story was told by the clowns. Clowns are not in
> the center of the events. They appear between the great
> acts, fumble and fall, and make us smile again after
> the tensions created by the heroes we came to admire.
> The clowns don't have it together, they do not succeed
> in what they try, they are awkward, out of balance, and
> left-handed, but . . . they are on our side. We respond
> to them not with admiration but with sympathy, not with
> amazement but with understanding, not with tension but
> with a smile. . . . Of the clowns we say, "they are
> like us." The clowns remind us with a tear and a smile
> that we share the same human weaknesses. . . . My grow-
> ing love for the clowns in Rome made me want to speak
> of such foolish things as being alone, treasuring emp-
> tiness, standing naked before God, and seeing things
> for what they are. . . . (1979:2, 58)

The tone of Nouwen's observations reflect a post-Vatican II
theological shift away from preoccupation with the language of
transcendence and towards theological discourse that emphasizes
personal human growth and experience. For an implicit theological
anthropology, see Baum (1970), Kung (1976), Schillebeeckx (1968),
and Tracey (1974).

Clowning provides rich, liminal metaphors for a spirituality
framed in the profane rather than the transcendent. The clown has
long been portrayed in Western history as the prototype of the
immanently human. Murray noted that since the 1870s, there have
been only two types of clowns: the whiteface and the august
(1956:304). The whiteface clown is interesting to look at, has
decent manners, and wears an expression created with red or black
paint. The august clown has a big nose, baggy clothes, and huge
shoes, is usually untidy, sometimes ragged, and often dirty. On
occasion, the august clown may be impeccably garbed, but in that
case, his clothes never fit. He carries gadgets that burn or ex-
plode, plus other ingenious articles that he finds perplexing and
frustrating. He is always in the wrong. By appearing at inoppor-
tune times, giving incorrect cues, tripping over themselves, or
messing up some vital prop, august clowns spoil the tricks of
whiteface clowns. Significantly, whiteface and august clowns
usually act in pairs. One is the foil for the other.

The interaction of whiteface and august clowns reveals both
sides of our being. The clown exercises the potential to be both
seriously ordered, as in the case of the whiteface, and playfully
chaotic, as in the case of the august. In reflecting on the na-
ture of clowning, the value of humankind is emphasized as a pri-
mary frame of reference for the identity of religious communi-
ties. During this process of recontextualization, Roman Catholic

sisters recognize themselves as immersed in the secular rather than the transcendent. Through recognition of themselves as secularized, sisters perform their roles in facilitating recognition of the transcendent.

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